SECRETS FROM PROLIFIC WRITERS

INK BY THE BARREL

BROCK SWINSON

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Introduction

“I never quarrel with a man
who buys his ink by the barrel.”
— Congressman Charles Brownson

Does a writer’s success come from a game of chance or from a belief in inevitable triumph, developed by those who are simply willing to put in the work?

Personally, I lean towards the latter and, after you finish this book, I hope you agree.

But first, let’s discuss rules and exceptions, along with their probabilities. Luck is likely a factor in every endeavor, even if the percentage it represents is less than one percent.

Take, for example, those conversations you've had, or overheard, that ask, “What would you do if you won the lottery?”

A lottery ticket only costs a dollar or so, but you have a chance to win $10 million dollars in return. With that lump sum, you could quit your job, tell your boss to shove it, and likely do more than you can even imagine by simply living off the interest of such a large prize.

Then, there’s the scratch-off ticket, which might cost five dollars to purchase, but only nets ten thousand dollars or so for the winner.

The odds of winning are slightly higher - 1 in 100,000 versus 1 in 292 million - but unless you buy a used car or take a one-week vacation, there’s little change to your day-to-day life with the smaller sum.

Work would be the same. Your home would be the same. Life would be the same. The problem, of course, is that this mindset is how humans view damn near everything. “Our emotions draw us to the first game, even though the second is ten times better, objectively considered,” writes author Rolf Dobelli in *The Art of Thinking Clearly.*

The probability in option two is drastically more likely, but the vision of success is drastically smaller, meaning life after the win would be only negligibly different from life as it was before the win. This is because humans have a “neglect of probability” mindset that leads to improper decision making, but it’s also because few people see what could happen in option two if they simply applied additional work.

If you believe writing is a game of chance, you will likely buy the Mega Millions ticket. After all, you have just as good a chance of winning as anyone else. With this mindset, your idea for a story just might be as good as those from Harper Lee or J.D. Salinger. Your next pitch could be as successful as *Game of Thrones.* You might be the next Christopher Nolan.

But, if you’re serious about writing, you know one idea or one project doesn’t really matter in the grand scheme of any career, because you need to publish often and write well to get noticed in today’s world. Sure, there are exceptions, but we’re looking for a clear path to success, not a scratch-off shot in the dark, right?

We want to avoid the lottery all-together. We want to know there’s something waiting for us on the other side. Yes, there’s some luck involved in terms of getting noticed among the noise of the modern,

attention-seeking world, but it's luck we can actually manufacture. When we focus copiously on a career as a writer, we actually choose a third option as our alternative to luck: inevitable success.

This book is about inevitable success.

Inevitable success comes from being prolific.

The methods in this book encourage readers to put in the work rather than to take individual chances. When you have multiple irons in the fire, all of sudden your perceived luck snowballs, grows in stature, and becomes utterly unstoppable.

Believing in luck for the sake of luck is an irrational, albeit common, response. If you wish to make your own luck, however, then it's time to turn pro, roll up your sleeves and embrace the daily grind. Leave common thinking in the dust next to those post-scratched lotto tickets.

In this book, and hopefully in your newly adopted attitude, embracing the professional mindset doesn't just mean making the decision to push luck aside and become a professional; it means being a committed creative, day after day, year after year. It means defending your time, finding your voice, and creating avenues to discover your specific journey as a writer.

Let outsiders believe luck is on their side, but know that you create your own luck by devotion to your craft, thus following in the footprints of successful creatives you admire. As Steven Pressfield writes in his book *Turning Pro, "*To feel ambition and to act upon it is to embrace the unique calling of our souls. Not to act upon that ambition is to turn our backs on ourselves and on the reason for our existence."

It’s time to take radical responsibility for your future as a writer.

It’s time to focus on finding your voice and developing your process.

It’s time to shift your mindset to the path of inevitable success.

It’s time to deliver consistent, globe-shattering work in the service of others.

It’s time to buy your ink by the barrel.

Part 1 - Time

Chapter 1 - Defend Your Time

“Nothing is worth more than this day.”
-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A railroad switch, or turnout, is a mechanical installation that enables railway trains to glide from one track to another. The switch consists of linked tapering rails, which offer the option of a straight through primary track or a diverging secondary track.

Metaphorically, let’s say the straight through track does just that: it goes straight through. Meanwhile, the diverging route comes to a momentary halt every 30-60 minutes, in 24-hour rotations.

This is the difference between a maker’s schedule and a manager’s schedule.

The manager’s schedule, which makes up most appointment books, is broken up into 30-minute intervals over the course of standard business hours.

Grab a coffee? No problem. There’s an empty slot for that.

Reschedule a meeting or extend it an extra half hour? There’s no “hard out” listed, so sure.

A pre-interview interview? Why not? There’s nothing else on the schedule.

Over time these so-called “openings” can take up the bulk of your free time, like death from 1,000 paper cuts. The maker’s schedule though, which many creatives prefer, disregards these frequent stops, which allows for creatives to put down the clock and pick up the pencil.

As programmer Paul Graham writes, “For someone on the maker’s schedule, having a meeting is like throwing an exception. It doesn’t merely cause you to switch from one task to another; it changes the mode in which you work.”

Essentially, it derails the creative track and stops the writer’s journey.

It’s nearly impossible to be creatively ambitious in one hour intervals. Like an Olympian training for an event, it takes an hour just to get started. Then, you still have to do the work. In order to truly grow as a creative, you have to make time for the reps.

For writers, programmers, and other creatives, it’s difficult to balance a maker’s schedule in a manager’s world, but it’s not impossible. More often than not, this simply means saying “no” to most of these time-fillers and working to keep an unscheduled schedule.

“For me, personally, it’s about habits,” said screenwriter Michael Lannan. “I am a very, very slow writer and for a long time, I didn’t properly schedule the time I needed to write. I needed to learn to shut the world out and make that time. I didn’t defend that time.”

Lannan is best known for creating the HBO series, *Looking*. He also told me, “Once I learned to block out that time and not look at my emails, to turn off my phone and not distract myself by getting a beer with friends, then I could make a lot more progress.”

Defending this time from obligations with friends and family is the first truly difficult step to becoming a professional writer. You’ve always answered the call from Mom. You’ve always met with friends after work. But, minor, progressive steps can occur as quickly as

emails and phone calls can be organized, filtered, or sometimes, ignored.

As novelist Annie Lamott once said, "No is a complete sentence."

If you can't reduce a cluttered schedule early in your career, the requests will only get worse as you gain notoriety and more people begin to request bigger and bigger chunks of your time.

Writer Ryan Holiday refers to his defense as "calendar anorexia." His goal is to have as few obligations as possible listed on his calendar. Holiday, a well-known author and business consultant, even moved from Los Angeles, California to Austin, Texas to make sure professional obligations were minimal.

Is that networking dinner party or business grand opening worth booking a flight? Probably not. This same mindset can apply to everything.

"Whatever the least amount possible I can have in my calendar without killing my career—that's what I want," Holiday writes in an article. "To be clear, this isn't some nonsense about not putting things in the calendar, like someone who says they're on a diet but eats a lot. This is about committing to and scheduling next to nothing on a daily and weekly basis."

Here's a thought catapult to help you get started: whenever you schedule anything - a phone call, a face-to-face meeting, a lunch date - it's literally giving away a piece of your life. That's what time is, little chunks of your life, laid out in 60-second intervals.

Most people would not purposefully give away land or even leave their doors unlocked while running errands. Most people would not give away large sums of

money or throw out something that might be monetarily valuable. And yet, we're all expected to give up our free time to anyone who asks, simply because it's the polite thing to do (it's not really "free," now is it?).

Time is the one thing we run out of and the one thing we can somewhat control, or, it is at least one thing we can control in terms of how we participate in it.

When all of the seconds drip off the clock though, that's it. So why waste time on trivial things that matter little? Why ignore your writing just to please another manager? What can you make while everyone else manages a schedule?

Assuming you prepare your defense with some regularity, another major problem is that individuals believe they can simply find balance. People believe that despite the fact they're living a mostly reactive life, somehow everything will fall into place as if they were being proactive with their schedules.

This is delusional thinking.

There is no balance to discover.

The reason you won't find balance is because you need to create it for yourself.

But in order to create balance, it's vital that all non-essentials be eliminated. Do you really need to be on that weekly call? Do you need to keep up that hobby simply because you've always done it? Does everything you have written down actually belong on your to-do list?

Call it essentialism. Call it minimalism. It doesn't matter which label helps you get started. Reduction is the first step to becoming a professional writer. It's about

doing more with less, and fighting for your time, even if that means missing out on seemingly urgent matters.

“The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials,” wrote Chinese Inventor Lin Yutang over five decades ago. Writers have always been worried about distractions, but these days, we voluntarily choose to be overworked, overcommitted, and overloaded.

Choosing what’s important in your life is just as important as the writing itself. In fact, it’s nearly the same process.

You’re looking at limitless options and eliminating everything that doesn’t fit. This is true for your writing. This is true for your life. It’s the same as choosing the right word, the right sentence, the right lead, or the right title.

Mark Twain is known for saying that finding the right word is the difference between the "lightning" and the "lightning bug." In addition to proper words, elimination, or the white space around these words, is just as important. So is the time it takes to write and edit your work.

You learn to write by writing and all writing is really just an effort to try and solve a problem. Creatives argue against a mathematical approach, but at the end of the day, it’s about putting words on the page (even if the words end up balled up on the floor at day’s end).

If writing is your job, you learn to write every day, just as you would with any other job. As John Grisham famously said, “Something about writing made me spend large hours of my free time at my desk.” It’s dedication to the craft. And with enough dedication, writing becomes a career, not just a hobby.

It's difficult to think about longevity or diligence in any aspect of life, but it's necessary, especially with writing. It's necessary to create milestones. It's necessary to chip away at the rock to see what sculpture exists underneath. The more often you sit at your desk, the quicker you enter the flow state. The quicker you enter the flow state, the quicker you get to the real work.

But how do you stay dedicated? What about inspiration? What about creative blocks?

There's a quote in the San Antonio Spurs locker room by Jacob Riis. The quote says, "When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that last blow that did it, but all that had gone before."

This is why simply showing up is the first step in becoming a professional writer. It's not sexy or glamorous, but putting in the reps creates results. There are floods of transformational programs that promise quick abs, fast routes to skinny, or even time hops to enlightenment, but these are essentially all nonsense.

All of these programs fail 99 percent of participants because the shortcut itself is a lie. Sure, there are best practices and common principles, but shortcuts aren't realistic. You have to fundamentally change your habits from the inside-out to find the results you crave.

Those who think long-term about their goals succeed because their timeline continues on and on until it reaches the point of success. The success

intersection actually arrives faster because you're moving twenty steps in one direction, rather than one step in twenty directions.

You can't continue to look for shortcuts because they're not there. Likewise, the older you get, the more harm the search for a shortcut can cause. Instead, you need to ask yourself, "What makes success inevitable?" The only real answer is consistency.

But this doesn't mean you can't dream big with your goals. As author Michael Lewis reasons, "When you're trying to create a career as a writer, a little delusional thinking goes a long way."

You have to be realistic about the process. It's unlikely your first novel will reach the masses generation after generation like *The Catcher in the Rye,* but it can reach a small following to give you 1,000 true fans. That's a start. This number, which is drastically smaller than the bestsellers most people dream of, can give you a professional career (more than just "writing words for money" as the narrator says in *The Rum Diary*).

Again, it's about putting in the reps.

Mathematically, writing 500 words per day creates the first draft of a book every 100 days. This gives you another 265 days to research, rewrite, and edit. One year is hardly long-term thinking, especially when you consider the output of someone like J.K. Rowling, who created the *Harry Potter* series and outlined the bulk of the story before she wrote the first word.

Logistically, this makes sense but why are small steps so hard to follow? Because people are fundamentally bad at judging how long projects will take.

Most people have no idea how long it would take to write a book because they romanticize all-nighters and weekend writing furies. This isn't writing. Those adderall-infested spurts represent word vomit. It's lust. It's wishful thinking. Jack Kerouac wrote *On The Road* in a frenzy, they say. Sure, but he also spent years editing it.

When I spoke with Jessica Sharzer, the screenwriter of *A Simple Favo*r, she told me, "A lot of newer writers take two years to write a screenplay. If you're going to be a professional writer, no one is going to give you two years to write anything. You have to learn to discipline yourself, sit down like it's a real job, inspired or not, and turn out material."

This sounds hypocritical maybe, but for professional writers, slow writing actually means fast writing. It drips out one word at a time, but the faucet gets turned on every single day. Like weightlifting or distance running, this is something you get better at over time, but it's also something that can quickly fade away if you let those muscles start to deteriorate.

Bill Gates once said, "Most people overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in ten years." There are compound interests and unknown depths that can be acquired with continual reps at the keyboard. The only way to dive to the ocean floor is to start on the surface. The treasure is waiting for you underneath but it takes time, practice, and patience to get to it.

This isn't to say those trial runs aren't impactful in their own right. First attempts help writers find their voices and produce a prolific amount of work in which they can filter out the garbage to uncover something

real. Screenwriter Jalmary Helander says, “I’m a really slow writer. It feels like 90 percent will not be used and only about 10 percent will reach the final.”

This overflow should be expected, but that doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing. In fact, quite the opposite. Think of a film or book that inspired you. Most of it doesn’t stick, but the parts that do are all the more powerful. When you’re writing, the same thing is true for your own work. Most of it isn’t going to be anything great, but you have to wade through the tide to discover what’s underneath.

Filmmaker and New Hampshire resident Ken Burns spoke about his work as a distillation process: “We make maple syrup. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup. That’s pretty much what we want to do [as documentarians]. We are distilling the essence of all that we have collected. You have to collect more than you need.”

Likewise, Lorrie Moore says, “Life is a field of corn. Literature is the shot glass it distills into.” In order to create aged corn whiskey, we need the entire field of corn. We need to defend the time it takes to do the work. This means creating free time on your schedule. This means saying “no” more often than “yes.”

When you say “yes,” you’re actually saying “no” to everything else in your world, like time at your desk. But, when you say “yes,” you’re only saying “yes” to one thing. If you’re going to say “yes” to one thing, let it be making time at your desk, every single day.

This mental shift doesn’t mean you get to blame everyone else for your lack of writing though. Instead, you’re going to take radical responsibility for your

schedule, for yourself and from yourself. Defending your time comes down to you as much as anyone else.

More than likely, there's something you enjoy that you can give up (or at least postpone) to reach your daily milestones. It might be infinite scrolls on social media. It might be excessive amounts of television. If you don't know where the drain is, track your habits for a week and see where you spend a massive amount of time on "nothing."

Your "nothing" could be anything, but it's definitely something.

Leo Tolstoy says, "The difference between real material poison and intellectual poison is that most material poison is disgusting to the taste, but intellectual poison, which takes the form of cheap newspapers or bad books, can unfortunately be attractive." (If only Leo could see our unstoppable dopamine-driven mass media today...)

But this doesn't mean it's too late.

Now is the time to start your journey to becoming a professional writer. Now is the time to figure out what the word "professional" means to you. It doesn't necessarily mean money (although it should), but it does mean dedication. As the Chinese Proverb says, "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now."

That's the challenge. The challenge is defending your time to sit in your chair and put words on the page, over and over again. The challenge is entering into that struggle, because something inside you encourages you to do so, even when you really don't want to put in the time. There are so many other things to do that appear

to matter more, and it's a well known fact that writers with no sense of urgency have the cleanest homes and tidiest desks, thanks to this heightened level of procrastination.

It is a struggle, but it's not a bad struggle. It's a struggle in the same way that going to the gym or raising children is a struggle. It's a labor of love. In the book *Climbing Everest,* George Mallory speaks about his many journeys and struggles up the mountain. This somewhat parallels the writer's journey.

The climber says, "People ask me, 'What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?' And my answer must be, 'It is of no use…'" He clarifies, "If you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forward upward, then you won't see why we go."

It's this journey that creates the flow state.

It's this journey that is the delicate yet fierce endurance race onward and upward.

It's this journey, one step at a time, that turns an amateur into a professional.

Writing is a method in which to uncover life's ebbs and flows, reaching for it rather than strangling it, relaxing a little but pursuing a lot, sometimes letting it happen while other times chasing after it. This, of course, isn't to say that consistency doesn't produce more bad days than good.

As the *True Detective* character Rust Cohle says, "Life's barely long enough to get good at one thing." But this brings us to the second part of the time

balance: You must fight to defend your time in the chair, but then fight just as hard to defend your time away from the chair (see more about this idea later in the book).

This time in recovery must also be defended.

It's within the recovery that the muscles grow.

As listed in The Breema Center's *The Nine Principles of Harmony,* writers need to remember the phrase, "No hurry, no pause." Meaning, the struggle to sit in the chair should be difficult, but the writing shouldn't be difficult. If you sit there and allow yourself to write or do nothing, eventually you will write. Move at the rate that satisfies your abilities, but keep moving.

If you can't get anything on the page, it means you're putting too much pressure on the work. The words flow, then you filter, not the other way around. You're not going to produce something amazing with every keystroke, but neither is anyone else.

Instead, you fight to get to the chair, then let time work with you, not against you. If you're swimming against the current, rethink your path. If you're working against gravity, relax the task. "No hurry, no pause."

Like reading thousands of books, putting in the work will allow you to make faster connections on the page. Reading encourages faster reading and better comprehension. Writing encourages faster writing and better output. "No hurry, no pause."

Within the non-formula formula, the non-shortcut is the shortcut.

The best way to be a great writer is to become and remain a great writer. Everything else is essentially a Zen-like state that you can enter and exit with trained focus. You just need to care about the work and the time

it takes to create an environment that encourages great work.

As Robert Pirsig writes in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, “There is no manual that deals with the real business of motorcycle maintenance, the most important aspect of all: caring about what you are doing is considered either unimportant or taken for granted.”

The same is true for writing.

Pirsig’s flow state comes both as a rider and writer. “You see things on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other,” he writes. “In a car, you’re always in a compartment - everything you see is just more TV. You’re a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle, the frame is gone. You’re completely in contact with it all. You’re in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming.”

For those who do not defend the time to be more than a passive observer in life, the result is an endless day-to-day shallowness, which the rider calls “a monotony that leaves a person wondering years later where all the time went and sorry that it’s all gone.”

The author concludes, “The world has no existence whatsoever outside the human imagination.” If this is true, then why not enter and exit the writer’s imagination as often as you are capable? Why avoid the desk? It’s the primary track that leads the theoretical locomotive to every destination you could ever want to visit, and many more you never knew existed.

Chapter 2 - Ruthless Prioritization

“Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important.”
- Stephen R. Covey

Doubt is a word for adults. Children know little to nothing about it. But you understand it on a deep fundamental level, don’t you? The uncertainty. The lack of conviction. The threat of doubt and its heavy influence on the creative spirit.

You’re not alone.

Every writer understands doubt, faces doubt, and sometimes - but not often enough - prepares for doubt. It would be easier if doubt traveled alone. If only it traveled alone. But it doesn’t. It’s got its own posse.

Every writer faces some version of the three-headed beast: doubts, obstacles, and distractions.

It comes with the territory. It’s a part of the writing process just as much as the metaphorical pen and pad. There is an answer to this dilemma of course, but not one wrapped in a neat little bow. The answer to doubt’s trio is being ruthless. Ruthless to everything that gets in your way, such as the false urgent, the disguised petty, and even your own insecurities.

“I think the most important thing we’ve learned as we’ve grown is that we have to prioritize,” said Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg. “We talk about it as ruthless prioritization. And by that what we mean is: only do the very best of the ideas. Lots of times you have very good ideas, but they’re not as good as the most

important thing you could be doing. You have to make the hard choices."

From a company who previously carried the motto, "Move fast and break things," this is quite the u-turn, but perhaps it was inevitable. At grander scales, greater accomplishments mean greater rewards, but greater risks mean greater mistakes.

Whether or not you're helping run a multi-billion dollar company, the idea of "ruthless prioritization" is one that should entice everyone, especially if you make your money organizing words on the page.

Prioritization is not only about deciding the relative importance between seemingly urgent tasks and habits. It's also about mindset. And mindset, in any field, will make or break a career. It could even mean life or death.

As World Cup alpine skier Bode Miller once said, "If I'm at the starting gate and I get a thought I know is counterproductive, that thought could kill me. I'm going 85 MPH down a sheet of ice wearing blades."

To be ruthless about your priorities, you must be fully committed to your goals, and your schedule should adequately reflect those goals and priorities. If Bode is thinking about grabbing a hot chocolate after the event or wondering how many "Likes" a recent post got on social media, he could literally die. The fear of death increases awareness, but the difficult journey of the writer is to consider time at the desk as important as the time spent atop the mountain for the alpine skier.

The daily writing ritual requires complete concentration, but only for short bursts. As such, writers should treat the ritual as life or death.

Sit. Focus. Write. Repeat.

Then, it's as simple as sticking to rest principles between writing bursts. But, as hard as this sounds to accomplish, stopping negative behaviors is easier than trying to merely reduce negative behaviors.

When you reduce something, like eating sugar for example, you still have to make a decision every time a new form of sugar crosses your path. But, if you simply don't eat sugar, there's nothing to think about. It's a commitment. It's a mindset. It's a step towards ruthless prioritization. The same mindset is true for everything.

"It's easier to hold your principles 100 percent of the time than it is to hold them 98 percent of the time," reasons Harvard Business Professor Clayton Christensen. Once the negative aspects have been pushed aside, it's easier to focus on the positive aspects. In fact, the positive priorities start to drastically outweigh the negative priorities so much so that even major distractions can be overlooked.

"The roof leaked, but in that tiny house with no distractions, I wrote my first four books," says author Chuck Palahniuk.

When your priorities are in order, the principles behind the work start to reveal themselves in new ways. Suddenly, the restrictions no longer feel like boundaries, but reinforcers. If the nails aren't unsound, the house won't collapse. If the verbs aren't weak, the sentences won't fall apart. Each time you show up, it gets easier to show up the next time.

With this in mind, you're not working for today's you, but for a future version of yourself. And you owe this person a great deal because this person is a slightly better version of who you are today.

Continuing to make this version of yourself wait slows down progress in more ways than you can ever imagine. In this Catch-22 scenario, the rent is due now because every action is a down payment on your "future self."

"The work you do when no one is watching is the work that matters most," writes photographer Chase Jarvis in his book*, Creative Calling*. "Pros don't wait until they're pros to act like pros. The people who make it are the ones who are willing to show up and do the work without approval, permission, or praise. Don't fake it till you make it. Make it till you make it."

Jarvis also believes every major decision breaks down into tiny choices: "Pull an all-nighter or get some sleep, eat clean or binge on ice cream. All these decisions create our days, and our days create our lives. Habits are nothing more than behaviors that have become automatic through repetition and reward."

When it comes to your habits, you must be ruthless.

Humans want quick, easily-attainable rewards. The sugary food is tasty for a moment, but over time, it can kill you. The shortcut feels like a good plan, but it likely won't work and now you've wasted time when you could have been getting in your reps. Re-creating something unoriginal and impersonal seems like a good play because it worked for someone else, but it's got no

real connection to you or anyone else, so it doesn't matter. Repetition. Small reward.

Humans need difficult, confidence-building, long-term rewards. If you can focus on the longer goals, you can build a new life. Ignore the junk food and focus on healthy meals. Ignore the shortcuts and play the long game. Ignore what the "market is looking for" and write something personal for yourself. Repetition. Big reward.

It's also not enough to fundamentally understand how it works and do nothing about it. Writing is not a hobby as much as it is a calling. And if you picked up this book, it's likely more of a calling than a hobby for you. You just haven't fully committed to the idea of yourself as a writer (yet). As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe says, "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do."

You must apply.

You must do.

In fact, if you're still nibbling away at your work as if it were a hobby, you may find yourself suffering from pains that wouldn't exist if you would just take the plunge into the oasis of creativity that awaits you.

You're starving yourself with "Likes" and "comments" rather than gorging on a limitless abundance of creation that's just over the horizon.

There's an analogy made famous by politician Newt Gingrich, which was featured in a book by James Carville. It's about the dangers of choosing good enough over great. Let's call it the analogy of field mice and antelope.

Carville writes: "A lion is fully capable of capturing, killing, and eating a field mouse. But it turns

out that the energy required to do so exceeds the caloric content of the mouse itself. So a lion that spent its day hunting and eating field mice would slowly starve to death. A lion can't live on field mice. A lion needs antelope. This distinction is important."

If you spend your day wishing you were a more creative person, occasionally posting on social media or jotting down notes that will end up nowhere other than as half of a scribbled idea, you're hunting field mice.

If you dig deeply every day, and spend hour after hour at your desk churning out work (whether or not you're gaining approval from anyone else), you're hunting antelope. It takes as much mental energy to avoid something as it does to do something, so don't kill yourself with missed opportunities or half-assed attempts.

Hunt that which will sustain you.

When you reach this new level of discipline, you're one step closer to ruthless prioritization. It's not how you do one thing, but how you do everything.

Consider Nathan Algren's interpretation of the Samurai when he says, "They are an intriguing people. From the moment they wake, they devote themselves to the perfection of whatever they pursue. I have never seen such discipline."

As your level of discipline increases, it's nearly impossible not to become a better writer. Perfecting the small things perfects the big things. The right word. The right sentence. It's no different than the right workout, the right breakfast, or the right morning routine. "On the most basic level," writes Mary Karr, "bad sentences make bad books." And bad nights make bad mornings.

And bad mornings make bad days. And bad days make bad weeks. Like anything else, writing is a behavior that can be improved, analyzed, and managed. Ignoring it can create a bad life.

But the process is more important, in some ways, than specifically what you're doing within the process. As the old saying goes, "Don't dissect the bird to get to the song." The process, as it were, starts with a simplistic ritual. And it shouldn't take longer than it takes to listen to a favorite song. It shouldn't be overly complicated.

Choreographer Twyla Tharp writes, "In order to be creative, you have to know how to prepare to be creative." Tharp prepares with a morning ritual. She wakes up before dawn, throws on her workout clothes - leg warmers, sweatshirt, and a hat - and hails a taxi to her gym on 91st and First. But, she doesn't consider the stretching or the weight training to be the ritual. It's also not the dancing, nor the teaching. "The ritual is the cab," she writes in her book *The Creative Habit.* "The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual."

Find the ritual.

And let the bird sing.

Like dominoes, more tasks fall after the ritual, but the ritual itself should be simple. If the ritual is a two-hour workout, it's easier to quit.

For a musician, the ritual could be picking up the guitar, not practicing chords for an hour.

For a writer, the ritual could be sitting at the desk each morning, not writing 2,000 words.

The ritual should be easy enough that you can do it in a few minutes, but powerful enough that it will

lead to bigger and better aspects of the craft. The ritual is the hinge on which the massive door swings. It's small, but incredibly powerful when aligned correctly.

In another actionable example, Jerry Seinfeld has a red "X" system. Every day, he focuses on writing one new joke. When he completes the task, he grabs a big red marker and puts a big red "X" on the calendar. It's the only thing on the calendar so there's no confusion about how or when to complete the task.

"After a few days, you'll have a chain," he said. "Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You'll like seeing the chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job is not to break the chain."

It's supposed to be simple.

It's supposed to be easy.

(One could argue it's even supposed to be transportable.)

Your ritual might be lacing up your running shoes or putting the leash on your dog or opening your laptop or writing a single sentence. It's just a hinge. The habit follows after. But without the hinge, the door won't open.

If you don't know where to start, start with something obvious - something you already own, some object that is cheap, or some tiny habit that aligns with your goal.

"When failure is expensive, plan carefully. When failure is cheap, act quickly," writes *Atomic Habits* author James Clear. "Motion does not equal action. Busyness does not equal effectiveness."

When planning your ritual and battling for ruthless prioritization, plan on the aforementioned trio

showing up again; doubts, obstacles, and distractions will likely confront you aggressively. How will you defeat the bloodthirsty pack?

Why might you doubt yourself?

What distractions might come your way?

What unexpected obstacles might you face?

The results of this fear-provoking visualization is likely years and years of hesitation or self loathing. For many people, the school system teaches a slave-like mentality crafted for the mundane, thanks to carrot-and-whip systems: feed me so I can work; whip me or I won't work.

But when you take away the carrot and the whip, you have the freedom to choose how you wish to proceed, what rituals will make up your life, and how to properly prioritize your schedule with nothing other than priorities. Choose what matters. Abandon the carrot and the whip.

Eventually, other rituals will sneak into your arsenal. Some will work well. Some will fail miserably. It doesn't matter. Keep at it.

Every individual action is a step forward and while no single instance will change the belief you have in yourself, if you stack up enough successful rituals, you can change your entire identity. You can become whomever you want to become because you're basing your new identity on actions.

Mark Twain would write lying down.

Ernest Hemingway would write standing up.

Aaron Sorkin acts out his dialogue.

Vladimir Nabokov used a commonplace book.

Dan Brown writes next to an hourglass on his

desk, so he knows when to take a break to stretch or do push-ups.

Francine Prose writes while facing the wall to avoid distractions.

Alexandre Dumas used a color-coded system while writing *The Three Mu*sketeers and *The Count of Monte Cristo.*

Honoré de Balzac would burn through 50 cups of coffee during a day of writing.

And Victor Hugo wrote *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in the nude.

The point of these rituals is to write, so if it helps you write, do it. There are all kinds of writers and all kinds of ways in which to write. They're different behaviors with the same end goals and no one can truly judge you for behaviors as long as you get results. Jane Goodall says, "Behavior doesn't fossilize." So if it helps you to write in the nude, write in the nude (but keep it to yourself).

Soon, you will have rituals within your rituals.

John McPhee draws a box around words that do not fit in his first draft, along with words that present an opportunity for better words. "First drafts are slow and develop clumsily because every sentence affects not only those before it, but also those that follow," he says.

The rituals are part of what make up the atmosphere in which you work best. Like a swimmer preparing for an event, it's a way to stabilize the mind and body to perform. It's your ritual which triggers your motivation. "Motivation isn't something to be discovered, but to be created through proactive and forward action,"

writes Dr. Benjamin Hardy in the book *Personality Isn't Permanent.*

The ritual, simple as it may be, is what ignites the entire process, like the flame that clears the field of brush. But what few people realize is that these flames are going to ignite one way or another, whether or not you control them. This is why it's so important to be the one holding the match. If you do not deliberately form good habits, then unconsciously you will form bad habits.

Despite the fact that most people judge themselves on their intentions and others on their actions, actions are everything. Actions are more important than what you say, what you believe, and how you vote. Actions, or what you spend your time doing, say everything about you, and what you truly believe is important.

When you start to define these actions with tiny rituals, you can see new aspects of yourself. Suddenly, your reflection is more than one person. For writers, this means separating the two halves of the brain and the many insecurities within. You have to take away the judgement to be creative. You are the writer and you are the editor - just not at the same time.

As Kevin Kelly writes, "Separate the processes of creation. You can't write and edit, or sculpt and polish, or make and analyze at the same time. If you do, the editor stops the creator. While you invent, don't select. While you sketch, don't inspect. While you write the first draft, don't reflect. At the start, the creator mind must be unleashed from judgement."

Once you have your priorities laid out, you can figure out whether or not they work. First you measure, then you manage.

"There are all kinds of writers and all kinds of methods, and any method that helps you to say what you want to say is the right method for you," writes William Zinsser.

It's within your chosen method that you will discover new grounds.

It's within your chosen method that you will discover who you are and what you're passionate about.

As for those of you who are confused about your passions, that's no problem either. Most passions are actually discovered in hindsight. Action brings passion. "I don't doubt that [Steve] Jobs eventually grew passionate about his work, but so what?" asks Cal Newport. "All that tells us is that it's good to enjoy what you do. Compelling careers often have complex origins that reject the simple ideas that all you have to do is follow your passion."

All of this, of course, is just to say that sometimes you have to lose small for an unknown amount of time to win big in the long run. You have to love small victories. You have to love incremental steps. You even have to love seemingly, never-ending plateaus.

If you're looking up to a prolific mentor you feel exists in the heavens, know that it's less public when writers are struggling than when they're successful, in the same way that the news does not report on everyone who loses the lottery. But, within sports, we see this shifting dynamic in teams that make massive,

multi-year turnarounds, and the many highs and lows that come with such a feat.

Take the Chicago Cubs.

“The Cubs were not good because the organization focused on the wrong things,” said the youngest General Manager in the history of the MLB, Theo Epstein. “They always wanted to make sure next year’s team looked like it had a chance to win because the team was going to be up for sale at any moment. It means a lack of long-term planning, focus on the short term, focus on optics,” he said. “You can’t do one year in baseball. [We had to be willing to] let the team get really bad, as bad as it’s ever been, [to] get rid of their favorite players and [lose] a hundred games, because that’s how bad we’d have to get to get good.”

The problem? You can’t do one year in anything you’re truly serious about.

The solution? Small losses. Big wins - on a long-enough timeline.

The problem is that most writers can’t see this timeline. Hell, most people can’t see this timeline. And those who don’t want to change simply do not want an incentive to change. Be different than most writers. Be different than most people. Be ruthless with that which matters most and discover your incentives.

As for the word “ruthless,” it’s often defined within a negative context, but when you think about showing no pity or compassion, you must think of this mercilessness as the mode in which you view incoming doubts, obstacles, and distractions.

These chronic killers are like a trio of sadistic vampires outside your door. Sometimes they come

snarling and sometimes they come in silence, but you must not invite them in. Never invite them in. Let them starve. Let them die. One by one. Be ruthless. Be merciless. In the end - it’s you or them.

Chapter 3 - Annihilate Writer's Block

"Block. It puts some writers down for months.
It puts some writers down for life."
-John McPhee

To be blunt, writer's block is bullshit. There, I said it. I'll say it again: it's complete and total bullshit. It's not real. It's not a real thing. It feels real, sure, but that doesn't mean anything. Feelings are just feelings. Action is action. You, as a writer, are looking for action. The action of putting words on the page.

Writer's block, on the other hand, is not action. Writer's block is perception, specifically a false perception.

Accepting it or not - preparing for it or not - that's the problem. That is real.

That said, I believe that you might believe in the looming tower of writer's block - like how small children believe in Kris Kringle - but that doesn't really mean anything either, now does it?

So what is it?

What is this feeling?

Let's hypothetically believe in the myth for a moment in order to debunk it.

"Writer's block has something to tell us, because it's speaking from the soul's point-of-view, which is often ignored," says Depth Psychotherapist Philip Ruddy. "No two creative blocks are alike. If you ask me the most common type of creative block, I would say that it is an

expressive creative block. But what usually lies beneath that is some form of anxiety or depression."

Let's start with a hypocritical approach to get our foot in the door: writing is important, but it's not that important.

Putting pressure on yourself to write the next great American novel or pen a New York Times best seller would put any writer down for the count. The same is true when you hope a book or screenplay will make you famous or help you get rich.

To avoid giving a creative block power over your ability to produce work, first examine your approach to the work.

In the book, *Big Magic,* author Elizabeth Gilbert refers to the two journeys a would-be writer can take to become a have-written writer. One path is dreadful and painful every step of the way. The other path is playful and fun every step of the way.

Gilbert refers to these two journeys as paths of the tortured martyr and the playful trickster.

The first one is associated with anyone who's ever purposely tried to hit rock bottom for the sake of their work (this is the iconic cliché of being a writer).

The second one is associated with playful writers who sit in the chair every single day for the blissful joy of writing (whether or not they receive any form of recognition for the work).

Most individuals aren't fully one version or the other, but if you can navigate yourself in the direction of the playful trickster, Gilbert argues you'll be closer to finding satisfaction in the daily grind of the work.

With this mindset, the act of writing won't be a task you dread, but rather something that gives the seemingly mundane a purpose. In other words, you won't just be laying bricks, but building a Cathedral.

"I can make my creativity into a killing field, or I can make it into a really interesting cabinet of curiosities," reasons Gilbert.

The magical aspects of her book come in the purview in which she views the creative spirit. Her view on writer's block is the same as her view on inspiration in the mysterious muse: "If inspiration is allowed to unexpectedly enter you, it is also allowed to unexpectedly leave you."

She believes ideas are looking for outlets and it's actually possible that if you fail to act on an idea, it will move on to someone else. Then, when you see your idea come to life from another writer, you realize the "magic" left you, and eventually found its way to another outlet.

Whether or not you buy into this supposition, the sense of urgency she creates around getting ideas on paper is valid. If you don't capture the opportunity, or gift of an idea, the gift will find someone who will.

Personally, I don't agree with everything Gilbert says in her book, but I do believe that if you believe it and it helps you write, that's what matters. If sitting in your chair at a specific time of day brings a mystical muse to you, then sit in your chair. The same is true for standing on your head before you write, or downing a few creatively-infused espressos. Whatever gets you to write, do it (assuming this something is legal). But you must write whether or not you feel inspired.

Gilbert also says, “I sit at my desk and I work like a farmer, and that’s how it gets done. Most of it is not fairy dust in the least.”

Assuming there’s no fairy dust to gather or manuscripts to be found at the end of the rainbow, what is the feeling associated with writer’s block?

If you can’t put your finger on something that might simply be anxiety, depression, or underpreparedness, perhaps we can simply call it fear.

Fear is an unpleasant emotion caused by something perceived as dangerous. Fear was very useful back when humans were often in positions of life and death. But these days, now that humans are officially at the top of the food chain, fear is less valuable - or, at least, the value of fear has changed.

Now, we must remember that more often than not, there is nothing on the other side of fear. It’s no longer a valid master. In fact, it’s hardly even a decent backseat driver.

Don’t listen to it.

Don’t feed into it.

Don’t let it stop you.

Instead, use it.

Fear will always exist, but now it represents a method in which to grow rather than something dangerous that might actually destroy you. In writing, it’s best to approach your fear, because how you react to fear is how you react to growth.

When you choose to be a creative person and allow for that creativity to be a part of your life, you also have to allow for fear to be a part of your life.

“When I refer to creative living, I am speaking broadly,” explains Gilbert. “I’m talking about living a life that is driven more strongly by curiosity than by fear.” Every writer experiences fear, because fear is nothing more than a lack of security - a feeling of the unknown with respect to that which makes you uncomfortable.

“I’m scared,” admits Harper Lee after the monumental success of *To Kill a Mockingbird.* “When you’re at the top, there’s only one way to go.”

A lack of fear comes from comfort, but being comfortable reflects a plateau not a mountain. Fear comes from being uncomfortable, as does growth.

“Each of us has an inner thermostat setting that determines how much love, success, and creativity we allow ourselves to enjoy,” writes Dr. Gay Hendricks in *The Big Leap*. “When we exceed our inner thermostat setting, we will often do something to sabotage ourselves, causing us to drop back into that old, familiar zone where we feel secure.”

Security is not what’s important. Growth is what’s important. You need to aim beyond what you are capable of achieving in order to grow as a writer, and as a person.

“If you can’t handle the small moments when the stakes are low, you won’t show up in the big ones,” writes Benjamin Hardy. This particular writer has a culture wall in his home, where one of the inspiring quotes reads, “Better prolific than perfect.”

So how do you handle the small stakes to later conquer the big stakes?

Consistency, for starters, but let's break down the four steps every writer needs to understand and differentiate from one another:

1. Idea Creation & Research Stage
2. Write & Unload Stage
3. Revise & Edit Stage
4. Market & Promote Stage

If you're in the idea creation stage, you're not in the writing stage. If you're in the writing stage, you're not in the revising stage (although you're always somewhat in the marketing and promotion stage, but more on that later).

A lot of novice writers are so excited to "have written" that they jump the gun during the Idea Creation & Research Stage and move right into the Writing & Unloading Stage. This doesn't work, and, if it does work, it doesn't work long enough to make a career out of it.

In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr writes, "You think you know the story so well. It's a mansion inside your head, each room just waiting to be described. But pretty much every memoirist I've ever talked to finds the walls of such rooms changing shape around her."

In order to see the mansion as it will end up on the page, it's vital to understand the differences between those various stages of the writing process.

Non-fiction stories require research.

Fiction stories require research and patience.

Memoirs require research and inner exploration.

"You know you don't know what you're doing if the lines are dripping out like honey from a jar," says

screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, who famously wrote every single episode of *The West Wing* for four years and countless movies and television ever since.

Take your time, do your research, think about your high-concept idea, then decide to start writing.

In simple terms, it's the difference between playing offense and defense. There are different motives behind the different stages of the writing process. Sometimes you charge ahead. Sometimes you hang back. To do either well, you need to know where the metaphorical ball is and where you need to be.

But if you stay in the story too long, without putting it on the page, you will also find ways to suffer. "The difference between mad people and sane people is that sane people have variety when they talk story," writes author Maxine Hong Kingston. "Mad people have only one story they talk over and over."

It's work.

It's labor.

Basically, it's supposed to be hard.

But it's not impossible.

As Chuck Close says, "Inspiration is for amateurs - the rest of us just show up and get to work."

You want it to be hard because if it wasn't hard everyone could do it. Everyday that you write is a day someone else didn't write, but everyday that you don't write, is a day that someone else did write.

As you move forward, you pass barriers where others stop, and where you may have stopped in the past. The key is to be efficient in the ways in which you work, rather than to kill yourself trying to be effective in things that don't matter.

The labor is there to help you grow as a writer.

And, the more often you pass these barriers, the easier it will become to pass the next ones. As former Navy SEAL David Goggins writes in *Can't Hurt Me*, “The reason it's important to push hardest when you want to quit the most is because it helps you callous your mind. It's the same reason why you have to do your best work when you are the least motivated. It's the only way to expand your mind.”

Embrace the path that appears to be more difficult with clear vision. Vision brings clarity. Clarity brings focus. Focus brings success.

Easy choices make a difficult life.

Difficult choices make an easy life.

“Welding car bodies on an assembly line is work,” writes Lewis Hyde in *The Gift*. “Labor, on the other hand, sets its own pace. We may get paid for it, but it’s harder to quantify. Writing a poem, raising a child, developing a new calculus, resolving a neurosis, invention in all forms - these are labors.”

In the writing phase, if you hit a wall, it’s because something is missing. And, while the four stages are mentally different from one another, being in one stage doesn’t mean you can’t go backwards, or move in circular directions, to eventually move the work forward. The thing that changes is the mindset in which you are thinking and working. Offense. Defense. Where’s the ball? Where are you?

Ruddy, the therapist mentioned earlier in the chapter also told me, “Many writers will metaphorically invite their inner critic to sit down with them while they’re

in the creative process and wonder why they are getting stuck."

Screenwriter Veena Sud writes in the morning and lets her inner critic sleep in.

Filmmaker Casey Neistat films vlogs during the day, then edits the following morning.

Henry David Thoreau jotted down notes on walks, then wrote in his cabin.

You must separate the different stages of the writing process to avoid perceived blocks. "If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard," writes William Zinsser. But this creative also notes, "A writer will do anything to avoid the act of writing."

If you have trouble placing one word after another and are never sure what to cut, when to cut, or how to cut, this isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Ironically, the feeling of "stuckness" is actually a good thing.

It's not something to be avoided.

It's something on the path to real understanding.

If you don't know what to write, you might be closer to finding something truly remarkable. When ideas come easily, it's because they're unoriginal. When ideas are unoriginal, they're also not authentic.

"So much happens when you sit at your desk and don't have an idea," says author David Sedaris in his *MasterClass*.

Writing is all about selection. You must choose one word over millions from the language, then do it again and again. But, as Mae Jemison says, "You have something important to contribute and you have to take the risk to contribute it."

So what if you could look at the work another way? What if you could be the prankster, rather than the martyr? What if writing came easily? If you can find a way to remove the pressure you associate with writing, it can.

In a live conversation between perhaps the two most famous novelists alive today, George R. R. Martin asks Stephen King how he writes “so many books, so fast?”

Representing the two sides of the struggling writer - Martin the martyr, King the prankster - the duo discussed something that might be classified as writer’s block (or at least procrastination).

Martin concedes he will often think to himself, “I’ve had a really good six months. I’ve written three chapters,” while remarking to King, “You’ve written three books in that time.”

So what gives? For starters, their goals are the same, but different. King’s goal is to write six pages per day, which is likely between 2,500 - 3,000 words. Martin’s goal, on the other hand, is drastically less. His goal is to write a few chapters across a few months. It’s a matter of perspective, both in the process itself, but also the mindset.

“Mostly I try to get the six pages in [per day],” King says, admitting there are many distractions in life. “Entropy tries to intervene.”

Both of these writers have calloused minds, perhaps even more hardened because both claim they do not use outlines (the idea of Martin keeping the entire story of *Game of Thrones* in his mind is enough to give anyone writer’s block).

Despite their output and eventual fame, it's not a good idea for most writers to take this approach to writing.

The rules are what makes the writing happen.

Breaking the rules is what creates writer's block.

It's that simple.

Know the rules of your craft. Once you have a firm understanding of the rules, then you are free to break the rules. But, if you find yourself stuck, know where you went wrong (Hint: it was when you abandoned the rules).

Writing is not easy, but it is simple.

Place one word right after the other.

Repeat.

"You don't need complex sentences to express complex ideas," writes Paul Graham.

"A self-respecting artist must not fold his hands on the pretext that he is not in the mood," writes Tchaikovsky.

Get in the mood. Simplify your idea. Annihilate the perception of writer's block.

But here's the final reality of this myth known as writer's block: there is no blank page.

If you're writing a novel, there are countless examples to pull from for inspiration. If you're writing a screenplay, there is an act structure to follow. If you're writing genre, there are rules within the genre that the audience or reader actually expects to see. There are even ways in which to riff with yourself on stage at a comedy club.

Pete Holmes refers to it as a conversation with your anxiety. "It's not about the words," he explains.

Holmes - along with Brian Regan, Jerry Seinfeld, and Jim Gaffigan - all present different tones of voice on stage to represent themselves, but also other tones to reflect what the audience might be thinking. They use the anxiety to help shape the act and they've mimicked their heroes to find their own voices.

Weaponize your anxiety.

Mine from your depression.

Destroy your underpreparedness.

This way you will realize the reality of what you perceived as a block: there are nothing but sources of inspiration around you.

Zinsser observes**,** "Our daily landscape is thick with absurd messages and products. Notice them. They not only have social significance; they are often just quirky enough to make a lead that's different from everybody else's."

If you're stuck right now - right in this moment - write about what makes you angry. Write about the things you care about. Write about the moments of realization in which everything that followed was forced to be different.

If disaster strikes, don't waste the moment. Write about it. Report on what ails you.

Still nothing? Words still dripping out like honey? Or are you making excuses? If you need a sense of urgency to finish your work, demand a deadline.

"A deadline weeds out the extraneous and the ordinary," advises Kevin Kelly. "It prevents you from trying to make it perfect, so you have to make it different. Different is better."

Pixar creatives famously proclaimed that they do not finish films. Instead, they “release” them. This is dedication to story.

You can always put in more time and more effort, but at some point, it’s time to let go and move on to something else.

This is why a deadline is so important. When you have a deadline, or even the inclination to simply sit down and write or do nothing else, you will find the time and motivation to write.

If you’ve added everything you can to your routine and found that nothing works, perhaps it’s time for subtraction.

Perhaps you need to re-prioritize your essentials.

There's an iconic photo of author E.B. White sitting in his boathouse hard at work. His writing chamber is nothing other than a wooden shack with an open window. There’s a wooden desk and bench. To his right, there's a view of the lake. To his left, there's a barrel that doubles as his wastebasket. In front of him, there's nothing but an ashtray and a typewriter.

No distractions, just a man and his thoughts.

No distractions, just words on the page.

Nothing but the essentials.

Author Neil Gaimon describe**s** his writing process this way: “I’m allowed to do anything I like, as long as it isn’t anything. What I love about that is, I’m giving myself permission to write or not write, but writing is actually more interesting than doing nothing after a while. It’s a solid rule for writers. You don’t have to write. You have permission not to write, but you don’t have permission to do anything else.”

For many of these pre-tech writers, it was more satisfying to end the day with balls of paper on the ground than a completed manuscript on a computer. Sometimes, you need to bring in the physical to support the mental.

But if you find yourself doing nothing too often, you just need to start writing.

Remove the editor.

Remove the pressure.

Remove the mind if you have to, but get your hands moving.

"Write about something you can hardly remember," suggests Chuck Palahniuk in *Consider This,* his book on writing. "Your body is a recording device, more effective than your mind." Use your other senses, like scent, taste, smell, and the small tangibles that make up memories you can hardly remember. But then, the real act of writing should come in the Revise and Edit Stage.

This is when you should give "pressure" a seat at the table. This is when you need to feel pressure, to make the work something spectacular. The prankster is still driving, but the martyr is riding shotgun.

As Mary Karr says, "A story told poorly is life made small by words."

If you've read this far and still don't feel like you have a call for which to take action, consider this...

If you feel anxiety so much that you can't put a word on the page, you're not a writer. Do something else.

If you feel depression so much that you can't put a word on the page, you're not a writer. Do something else.

If you feel underpreparedness so much that you can't put a word on the page, you might be a writer, but you're stalling. You're skipping over the research or trying to milk a good idea that isn't a great idea.

You're a "wishful" writer, not a "willing" writer.

Be willing to work. Or do something else. It's not much more complicated than that.

Once you're willing to put in the work, then there is real magic (or fairy dust) to discover.

"The longer you can be with the unresolved thing, the more beautifully it will resolve itself," insists Tom Spaunbaur.

But if you find yourself waiting on something - a response to a request, an outsider's opinion, an internal idea to come - then you're not doing enough.

This is because you should be busy, but not overwhelmed.

You should have several projects in the works rather than one linear path, so you can move in lateral directions.

This defeats the so-called block and allows you to work during perceived writing blocks.

Focusing on one project at a time is ironically another spot where people get stuck. It sounds counter productive, but in order to hit the target, you must first pull the arrow towards yourself.

This doesn't mean multitasking. It means changing routes rather than waiting for repairs to happen. Sometimes the car is in the shop, but you have

the gift of using the whole garage. Simply put another roadster on the highway. You control the pace and the direction.

To steal from Gilbert one last time: “You already know so much more than you think you know. You are not finished; you are merely ready.” She goes on, “If greatness should ever accidentally stumble upon you, let it catch you hard at work. Your own reasons to create are reasons enough.”

Chapter 4 - Avoid Self-Sabotage

“Sometimes, magic is just someone spending more time on something than anyone else might reasonably expect.”
-Raymond Teller, Penn & Teller

Illusionists in the 1700s developed a system in which they could make items hover in space. Magicians like the charlatan Johann Georg Schropfer told gathering crowds he had the ability to conquer spirits.

This idea later became a fixture for 19th century phantasmagoria shows, where the key to the illusion involved a projector or lantern, along with a beam of light reflecting off a mirror into a cloud of smoke. The beam of light, which essentially landed on the cloud of smoke, would then create a hovering image that appeared to be a floating item.

These days we refer to this phenomenon as smoke and mirrors.

In this regard, magic takes time to create (for the creator), but only moments to encapsulate (for its viewer).

The cliche with writing is that smoke and mirrors create the illusion that a magical muse somehow guides the process. In this regard, many novice writers will believe they have some sort of gift, which is great when the gift is working, but not so much when the muse takes a week off.

Essentially, if you look at a string of words that speak to you as if they were magic, it’s possible that you’re correct, but only if you believe magic to be

nothing more than the effort it takes to change someone's perception with words.

"I envy writers who talk about the process of writing as if it's the mystical phone call from some muse who delivers dialogue," says *Castle Rock* creator Sam Shaw. "That's certainly not the case for me. It's always a long, painstaking descent. There's an idea that writers possess some kind of special genius but even the best writers want to kill themselves when they read their first draft."

Before you round up your bullets or search YouTube for directions on how to tie a noose, understand that this feeling Shaw is describing is merely part of the process. It's supposed to be scary. It's supposed to be nerve racking. But once you remove the magic from the writing, greatness is actually much more attainable.

Shaw adds, "The most important development as a writer is when you stop thinking of writing as a high art and start thinking of it as work. It took me a long time to do that, especially beginning as a prose writer. I had all of these highfalutin ideas about myself as an artist. In reality, the writers I know that have made a lifetime of writing have set aside those ideas and focus on the work at hand. They write every day."

Waiting for your muse to arrive is nothing more than a form of self-sabotage. Influence or untraced ideas feel magical, but it's no more magical than hitting a tree with an axe 300 times and believing magic occurs in swing 301 when the tree falls. The repetition, in fact, is where the magic comes from. Those last 100 hundred swings, which feel like a plateau, is what the process is

all about. While there's no magic there, per se, learning to love the plateau phase and avoid self-sabotage is in fact a superpower.

If you've ever tried to write every day, you might understand the effort it takes to make even the smallest bit of magic. In the movie *The Prestige*, there's a moment when the two magicians, Robert Angier and Alfred Borden, are watching a veteran magician named Chung Lin Soo perform the "magic fish bowl" trick.

According to Borden, the trick actually comes after the trick, when Chung Lin Soo pretends to be an old man. The trick is being strong enough to lift the fish bowl, but then pretending to be an old feeble man so no one discovers the trick behind the trick.

His life, therefore, is the performance.

It's the process not the results.

The same is true for writing.

The vast majority of authors that you've read aren't magicians, but they are performers. The performance is the act of writing. It's not magic. It's actually not even anything special. Instead, it's just individuals willing to put the time in to create something magical.

Jason Fuchs, writer on *Pan* and *Ice Age 4* realized this truth when he took a job in animation. "Animation writing is the closest screenwriting will ever get to day work," he told me. "You wake up, you go to the studio, you're there from nine until six, and then you come home. That broke me of some bad habits, and I learned I could deliver pages at five in the morning with a nuclear war going on."

Before this assignment, Fuchs felt like he needed inspiration in order to write. Fuchs continued, “That [job] gave me a lot of confidence because I thought I could only write with constraints of X, Y, and Z factors. With *Ice Age*, the stakes were so high I had to write. I performed outside my comfort level.”

This screenwriter realized something that he may not have otherwise, but it’s a lesson we can all learn from. The key is to create your own deadlines, rather than having to rely on a studio (or publisher or agent or teacher or whatever) to push you in the right direction.

You must guide yourself in the direction of a disciplined life.

Discipline with your time.

Discipline with your priorities.

Discipline to know there’s more to writing than magical thinking.

Screenwriter Luke Davies said, “I’ve gotten more disciplined. I had a more restless relationship with my writing in my 20s, and even in my early 30s, like a hot-cold, on-off button, which felt out of my control. But I have come to realize it’s not real**;** it’s the on-off switch thing when it all starts, I learned to deal with my resistance and self-sabotaging mechanisms.”

Davies’ comments on self-sabotage are true for everyone. It feels like the resistance comes from the outside, but it actually comes from within.

Something inside of you slows down the process to keep you from achieving the things you want to achieve. But, this inner anchor isn’t in control. It merely

feels like it's in control. It's a suggestion, not a command.

This inner voice will tell you you're unable to achieve the things you wish to achieve.

This inner voice will slow you down, even when you're on a solid streak to achieve the things you care most about.

This inner voice will try to stop you, but it doesn't have power over you.

You control your instinct for sabotage.

The idea that you are your own worst enemy is true for everyone. When you start to see a small amount of success, you instinctively act against your own self interests.

You tell yourself things you shouldn't.

You stop doing the things that literally make you feel better.

You procrastinate what matters most to do what seems urgent (or ignore the most important things all together).

The author Robert Firestone calls this the "critical inner voice." The critical inner voice represents a negative version of the self, like some sort of anti-self. It literally turns against you as you start to succeed. This anti-self fills the mind with critical self-analysis and other sabotaging thoughts to hold you back.

The comedian Joe Rogan refers to this inner voice as your "inner bitch." Rogan, specifically, is referring to that voice that tells you not to work out for the day, or to stay in bed and sleep in, or to skip the healthy meal and snack on donuts.

For the most part, this inner voice comes from early life experiences. Without even realizing it, you start to internalize attitudes directed to you from parents and other influential guardians during the early developmental stages of life.

Children internalize negative thoughts for a variety of reasons, especially when toxic parents display self-sabotaging tendencies. These insecurities pass from parent to child. While you can't change the past, you can change how you respond to these internalized ideas and consciously choose to act against them.

As you start to defy these sabotaging instincts, your critical inner voice will start to silence itself.

If you don't feed the inner critic, it will be too weak to speak.

In addition, the more you say "No" to the negative things and "Yes" to the positive things, you can actually start to build up a tolerance for choosing good and denying bad. The more you do, the stronger your so-called willpower will become.

You need to select your thoughts in the way you select meals for the day. Feed on that which will nourish you. You can cultivate this power. You can even change your instincts.

At first, changing self-sabotaging instincts will make you anxious, because you're fighting a negative behavior that is literally ingrained, but you must fight these instincts to be successful.

Turning on the TV first thing in the morning (that's got to go).

Checking your phone one more time before you go to bed at night (that doesn't help anybody).

Skipping your top priority to focus on those easier to-do tasks (who are you really fooling?).

Separate the destructive attitudes from the real experiences. Scrutinize the negative traits unconsciously passed on to you by caretakers to see how you've made them your own. Challenge disruptive adaptations and coping mechanisms. These systems might have helped you as a child, but they're hurting you as an adult, and they're killing you as a writer.

Once these steps have been taken, it's possible to develop your own unique values, beliefs, and ideals beyond that which has been enforced.

Once you learn to quiet the inner critic, you can actually get to work.

Once you get to work, you will be in a position to move on to the next level.

The only way to reach unknown greatness is to focus on the mundane daily details. In other words, it took a lot of blocks to build the pyramids.

"Writing well is a combination of hard work and good luck," says Akiva Goldsman, screenwriter of *Star Trek: Picard* and *I Am Legend.* "The hard work gets you on the platform, and if you're on the platform, the train will come. But if you're not doing the work, it won't."

When your inner voice tells you that your competition is beating you, that's just a bruised ego from a former mindset that doesn't serve you.

Instead you have to silence the voice with a new mindset; what steps can you take to make success inevitable?

“A successful screenwriting career is a culmination of wins and losses and the opportunity to keep playing,” adds Goldsman. “That’s a hard thing to remember. Nobody is always on. The job isn’t winning every day. The job is playing every day.”

Once you eradicate the pressure of waiting for the magical voice of a muse, you can notice the small things that make the work worth doing.

It’s not all about quality writing. At least not at first. It’s about garbage writing. You sift through the garbage to find something of quality.

Distill.

Refine.

Filter.

Do this enough and you’ll be a writer.

“I’m a believer in the ordinary and the mundane,” confesses comedian Jerry Seinfeld. “I always find that a little sad when they say, ‘We have quality time.’ I don’t want quality time. I want the garbage time. That’s what I like. You just see [your kids] in their room reading a comic book and you get to kind of watch that for a minute, or [having] a bowl of Cheerios at 11 o’clock at night when they’re not even supposed to be up. The garbage, that’s what I love.”

When the “garbage time” becomes the “quality time,” it’s possible to discover who you really are as a writer. Once you unlock this simple fact, the voice that lies within can start to emerge.

Then you can write without the need of a fictional muse.

Then you can write with an atomic war going on outside your window.

Then you can write so much you'll be hard at work when success finds you and too busy to change your schedule in a way that will stop serving you again.

"Lots and lots of people are creative when they feel like it, but you are only going to become a professional if you do it when you don't feel like it. And that emotional waiver is why this is your work and not your hobby," says author Seth Godin.

When you view the writing as a labor of love, your perspective on writing literally becomes more enjoyable, even when it feels like a pain.

In many ways, writing well is like chasing a decent batting average. Even the best hitters in the league strike out nearly 70 percent of the time. In short, you're supposed to suck for an extended period of time. And, you're supposed to suck even when you get pretty good. It's the times when you are terrible that make you better.

This is why Dave Grohl hates competition shows that force creatives to rely on individual gatekeepers to make or break careers: "Musicians should go to a yard sale and buy an old drum set and just suck," advises Grohl. "They'll have the best time they've ever had in their lives and then all of a sudden they'll become Nirvana. Just a bunch of guys playing some noisy-ass shit, and they become the biggest band in the world. That can happen again. You don't need a computer or the Internet or *The Voice* or *American Idol.* [Those shows are] destroying the next generation of musicians."

When you remove the idea that there is one individual gatekeeper, all of a sudden you can rely on yourself, your instincts, and your talents.

As financial expert Dave Ramsey reasoned during the 2020 financial crisis, “It’s up to me. The calvary is not coming.”

This is also true if you believe someone is simply going to open the door for you or show up at your house to hand you a fully detailed career. That’s not how it works (and once you get rolling, you’ll be glad that’s not how it works).

You have to do the work yourself.

You have to constantly audition and improve.

You have to know when and where to put your time to shape your own career.

And since you don’t know which route provides the golden ticket, you’re going to have to try things that simply don’t work. There’s no silver bullet, but there are plenty of lead bullets. The good news is that positive results help you find your way, but so do negative results. Like taking a long journey, each result provides guidance to shape the direction of the trip.

“Creativity is piercing the mundane to find the marvelous,” says Bill Moyers.

How much mundane are you willing to sift through to find something marvelous?

Distill.

Refine.

Filter.

It’s no coincidence that those who work the hardest also appear to be the luckiest. They’re out there looking for their “luck.” Through every bad draft, every weak sentence, and every public failure, they’re one step closer to success, but also one step closer to finding an authentic voice. “The universe is full of

magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper," states Eden Phillpotts.

Your wits will only grow sharper when you put in the time.

You can only put in the time when you stop self-sabotaging yourself.

You can only stop self-sabotaging yourself when you silence your inner critic.

Ryan Holiday says, "While creativity can seem like magic, like every magic trick, there is a method behind it."

The key to creative magic is total dedication to the craft. Within total dedication, it's possible to achieve greatness. But to achieve greatness, it's important to consider total immersion in the craft.

What is total immersion?

Terry Laughlin, founder of the *Total Immersion* swimming method, teaches swimmers a new way to perceive the difficulties of swimming. Across his 45-year career, Laughlin realized most swimmers end up exhausted by using the traditional methods.

Most teachers start their students off pulling and kicking across the top of the water. It's utterly exhausting. It's tiring enough to make you quit the sport on day one. But Laughlin's method contends that the shape of the body moving through the water is more important.

Swimmers can travel further and faster with less effort if they accept total immersion, moving with less effort and more aerodynamically, slightly underneath the water.

Described as “vessel-shaping,” the term arose in the 1980s, but never truly swept the swimming community. Bill Boomer, swim coach at the University of Rochester says, “The shape of the vessel matters more than the size of the engine.” By engine he means muscle power.

It’s possible that Laughlin’s method isn’t always the fastest method (especially for newbies), but it’s the most sustainable method, especially when distance is factored in (and distance is always factored in).

All of a sudden, runners were more capable of becoming triathletes. Adults who had never been able to do more than a doggie-paddle could swim for hours and hours, laps and laps, on and on. Laughlin called these laggards “adult-onset swimmers.”

Ironically, to swim this well, you have to drown a little in the beginning. The early sacrifice is the compromise to a life of mastery.

Likewise, total immersion in writing is the fastest “slow way” to build a career. It’s better in the long run to write 500 words per day than 2,000 words once a week (nearly twice as good when you consider written words per week).

The more work you create, the more likely you are to be able to create. The more you are able to create, the more likely you are to find success, where success comes in many forms, some of which you may have never imagined.

But in the end, it’s not you who decides how your work is perceived. Andy Warhol says, “Don’t think about making art. Just get it done. Let everyone else decide if

it’s good or bad, whether they love it or hate it. While they are deciding, make even more art.”

The more art you create, the more magic you can put out into the world. There’s no smoke. There’s no mirrors. There’s just ink and time. It’s up to you to continually put ink on the page and quiet your inner voice with all of its harmful suggestions. “Peace through struggle,” as Joe Rogan has said. “The inner bitch has been conquered...for today.”

Chapter 5 - Make Your World Small

“The worm in the radish doesn't think there is anything sweeter.”
-Sholem Aleichem

There’s a scene in Zack Snyder’s *Man of Steel* where Clark Kent thinks back on a moment of zen from his past.

As a boy, he hears the cloth of the American flag blowing in the wind outside of his classroom. The teacher’s chalk screeches across the chalkboard. His fellow classmates move and squirm in their seats, as every movement parallels the sound of gunfire on a battlefield.

“Are you listening, Clark?” asks his teacher.

Oh, he’s listening.

He’s listening too well.

The boy is taking in everything, but more so than other students because he’s discovering the hyper-sensitive emotions that will later turn him into the iconic Superman.

A dog barks outside; he hears it as if it’s inches from his face.

The teacher’s high heels click-clack on the tile floor like drums beating in his ears.

Her muffled voice, meanwhile, sounds like an echo coming from the bottom of a well.

Hearing the shrunken voice amidst the chaos is out of the boy’s control.

Then he sees her. Actually he sees through her. His X-ray vision reveals a skeleton in front of him. He

hears her heartbeat. Then he sees it. Her heart is literally pumping in front of him.

At this point, as he notices the zombie-like skeletons around him, the boy has a panic attack, which results in his hiding in a closet and the teacher calling his mother.

“How can I help you if you won’t let me in?” asks his mother from outside the door.

“The world is too big Mom,” says the frightened boy in the janitor’s closet.

“Then make it smaller,” she replies.

Four words. Four simple words that represent an idea powerful enough to help a young boy see his full potential. Four words transform an ordinary boy into a super man.

Clark’s foster mother made him Superman, not the powers from his biological parents. By focusing on the small things, Clark could later focus on the big things. This is a superpower everyone needs, especially in today’s noisy world.

The phone vibrates.

The email pops up.

Someone knocks at the door.

Honestly, none of it matters.

Without focus, time, prioritization, and discipline, superpowers matter not.

Like Clark Kent, we all need to avoid the noise in order to focus on the things that matter most. Focus is the superpower. Focus drowns out the noise. Focus is everything. But the good news is that everyone has this superpower. All you need to do is make your world small.

In that regard, the noise is an advantage, not an obstruction. You just need to understand how to harness it.

There's good noise and bad noise.

Good noise can inspire you (in the form of books and mentors).

Bad noise can derail you (in the form of excess entertainment and watered-down information).

Sometimes liabilities appear to be assets, but the key is simply to take action. Find the best "noise" you can find and begin your journey. If you can't tell the difference, begin with an open mind and a skeptical eye. The bad noise will identify itself. It's not worth your time. It knows you. You know it. The good noise will push you closer to your goals and narrow your focus.

In Mary Karr's *The Art of Memoir*, she writes, "A memoirist starts off fumbling - jotting down facts, recounting anecdotes. It may take a writer hundreds of rough trial pages for a way of speaking to start to emerge unique to himself and his experience, but when he does, both carnal and interior experiences come back with clarity, and the work gains an electrical charge. For the reader, the voice has to exist from the first sentence."

This, of course, is the challenge.

You have to uncover your voice. It's there. It's just not organized. It's not ready. It's part of the noise until you distill it.

When you write anything long-form, you will literally get better during the process. This means - assuming you write in chronological order - your last section will be written better than your first.

Rewriting is writing.

Rewriting is everything.

But, if you feel stuck, each genre or type of storytelling has rules to follow, which takes pressure from the dreaded blank page.

The rules light the way.

The genre tells you the direction.

The path will reveal itself when you take action.

“Novels have intricate plots, verse has musical forms, history and biography enjoy the sheen of objective truth,” writes Karr. “In memoir, one event follows another. Birth leads to puberty leads to sex. The books are held tighter by happenstances, theme, and (most powerfully) the sheer, convincing poetry of a single person trying to make sense of the past.”

It’s through this difficulty that a voice will start to float to the surface.

The discipline creates freedom. The freedom creates voice.

If you disagree, think how many films have been made from 120-page scripts or how many books have been written on 300 black-and-white pages. Because there are rules, there is a destination. The rules invite the voice.

“Developing a voice is actually learning how to lodge your own memories inside someone else’s head. The only way to develop a voice is to write your way into one,” explains Karr.

The voice in memoir often comes from a point of pain, but also from moments of great joy.

Like all forms of writing, the goal is to elicit emotion.

“Getting sophisticated about carnal writing means selecting sensual data - items, odors, sounds - to recount details based on their psychological effects on a reader.” Karr concludes, “Memoir is in its ascendancy - not because it is corrupt, but because the best ones openly confess the nature of their corruption.”

Aside from the rules, the greatest factor in deciding what makes or breaks the material lies in the responsibility of the writer.

John McPhee clarifies this statement in his iconic book, *Draft No. 4:* “You have only one criterion: if something interests you, it goes in - if not, it stays out. That’s a crude way to assess things, but it’s all you’ve got. Forget market research. Never market research your writing. Write on subjects in which you have enough interest to see you through all the stops, starts, hesitations, and other impediments along the way.”

Simplicity, therefore, is the best way to discuss characters, problems, and conflicts (we can argue about market research later).

Through simplicity you can create your own little world and you can make sure you’re contributing good noise to the world, rather than bad noise to derail other writers.

Through simplicity, you can shine a light on your private world, not only to help others understand your values, but so you too can better understand what drives you (Joan Didion famously admitted, “I don't know what I think until I write it down”).

“In constructing my private world,” writes W.H. Auden, “I discovered that, though this was a game, that is to say, something I was free to do or not as I chose,

not a necessity like eating or sleeping, no game can be played without rules." Auden adds, "A secondary world must be as much a world of law as the primary. One may be free to decide what these laws shall be, but laws there must be."

Through simplicity and rules, your world can shrink your thoughts and create manageable sentences, paragraphs, and stories. The greater world is there of course, but it's there for inspiration not distraction. Use it as a tool. Think of your small focused world as an umbrella that can be used to shield water or to capture it, depending on whether it's opened as intended or sitting upside-down in a storm.

Jessica Sharzer told me, "The thing that's comforting for a writer is that [genres] have certain expectations and rules. It's not like writing in a void or a blank page. You have certain expectations from the audience."

If you have an ambitious goal of writing books, creating films, or anything in between, sometimes you must take a backseat in order to clarify your vision.

Sometimes you charge forward.

Sometimes you hang back.

It's a dance to complete the draft.

"I think the director's best friend is compromise," says director Louis Leterrier, while working on the epic puppet series, *Dark Crystal,* for Netflix. "I knew the task was so massive that sometimes I had to take a backseat. In the writer's room, I love to be present on breaking story, but relax on dialogue."

He adds, "It's a dance between the writers, myself, and the puppet builders, so everyone can bring

their ideas. You just listen. Don't fight back. Let the idea grow. You plant ideas and let them grow into truths."

For plants to grow, they need time.

For ideas to grow, they need patience.

The rules push forward the story, but only when you can make your world small enough to dictate the story. Small enough to hear one plot. Small enough to hear one section. Small enough to hear one word after another.

Truth-teller Michael Singer wrote two books about the same incident in his life, but the rules he forced himself to follow created two very different books.

In *The Surrender Experiment,* Michael Singer wrote a memoir.

In *The Untethered Soul,* Michael Singer wrote a self-help book.

Same story. Different rules. One small world.

Not understanding the rules, on the other hand, creates conflict in the art.

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld says, "Poetry is bad stand up. It's carefully chosen words that have no laugh at the end."

Documentarian Ken Burns said, "Steven Spielberg and I obey the same rules of storytelling. The only difference is that he can make shit up and I can't."

Breaking the rules breaks the story, unless your audience wants you to break the story. Creating small worlds is particularly vital in rooms packed with various collaborators.

"It's a very mysterious process, writing with a group to find consensus," admitted Sam Shaw while working on the WGN series *Manhattan.* "It's an

aristocratic process. You put a bunch of smart people together in a room, who have different life experiences and you debate until you find an idea that's hopefully better than any one individual idea." Shaw concluded, "It is tricky though, because at some point, someone needs to be an arbiter and legislate a point-of-view as to how to move forward."

Some see the collaboration as freedom. Others see it as a hindrance. But everyone needs to follow a set of rules, even if the rules feel limiting at first.

Luke Davies says, "I put my heart and soul into the stuff I work on through the very intense process of a feedback loop with the other people in the project. I feel the satisfaction of having done hard work and now it's out of my control. I like that feeling."

In the phenomenal Netflix series *The Haunting of Hill House,* the rules were everything. "To connect to a wider audience, tell your personal stories wrapped in the cloak of a universal and popular genre. Lean into the requirements and the tropes of that genre and let the devil be in the details," creator Mike Fleming told me.

"Let the personal story you're telling be nice and nestled within that, as opposed to trying to change the world with something so specifically personal it can't find the audience. The hope was that if we could strip away all of the genre elements that it would still stand up as a character-driven, effective family drama," he said.

"That was always the criteria we were operating under. The horror elements are most effective when they bolster human drama, when they are born of the characters instead of something that the characters are reacting to…"

Through the tropes, Fleming found freedom.

"Ghost stories can always bring back characters in another form," he said. "*The Haunting of Hill House* had this freedom because of the supernatural crux of it to bring back people in different forms - or resurrect them entirely. So it's far less frightening to imagine killing a character who can be a ghost in the next episode."

Beyond the script, Fleming created his own rules on set to capture everything he needed for the edit, to make something remarkable, yet also rewatchable (appointment viewing for horror fans every Halloween).

"Every step I take - when I sit down to write or how I approach the scene - I'm only thinking about the edit. At that point, all of the other voices, all of the pressure, whether we're over or under budget, all of that doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is the footage that's in my bin."

He said, "More footage for me means few options. It changes the kinds of things I'll create. It affects where I stage things geographically within a story. It completely affects my shortlisting process and my scene breakdowns on set. It changes how I deal with actors because I'm thinking entirely about the edit. I'm not trying to get options, I'm trying to get what I need to build what I know I want to make."

Fleming is trying to keep his world small so he knows what type of world he's creating. The small focus helps the big picture.

Other creatives bounce back and forth between the various stages of creation.

Ken Burns says, "It's all part of the tenacity and the perseverance and constant investigation. If you limit

yourself to one research period, one writing period, one shooting period, one editing period, one finishing period, you limit the possibility of discovering what makes the film better. Why wouldn't you want to do that down to the very end? [Why wouldn't you] be open to the very end?"

Ken Burns' small world is only concerned with truth.

"Complexity kills motivation, which is why lasering in on one keystone goal changes the game," writes Benjamin Hardy. "A single goal allows for a more streamlined path, which allows you to not only see the outcome but also the path to making that outcome real. This skyrockets motivation and condense."

Benjamin Hardy's small world is only concerned with a singular focus.

"What's great about [the stranger comes to town] is that you know where you're going," says writer-director Scott Teems. "It sets up an ending, meaning he's either going to get caught or he's not. The tension comes from outside and pushes on the scene. Every scene has been loaded with tension, so you can let characters be and allow for silence because even the silence is loaded when the tension comes from outside."

Scott Teems' small world is only concerned with creating tension on the screen.

"Once you've exhausted your standard settings, consider gathering your characters and sending them into the great outside world for some fresh perspective," writes Chuck Palahniuk. "The larger world reminds characters of their smallness and mortality, and it prompts them to take disastrous action."

Chuck Palahniuk's small world is only concerned with making the unbelievable believable.

In Jack White's one-minute song, "Little Room," he sings:

Well you're in your little room
And you're working on something good
But if it's really good
You're gonna need a bigger room
And when you're in the bigger room
You might not know what to do
You might have to think of
How you got started sitting in your little room
Da da da Da da da…

Jack White's small world is only concerned with recognizing how to remain creatively hungry in a slightly larger world.

The poet William Blake writes;

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

William Blake's small world is only concerned with noticing the smallness in the natural world.

While it's true that limiting your views in life can make you foolish and ignorant, it's also true that without selective ignorance, you will never be the writer you wish to become.

What concerns fill your small world? How will you push against the unhealthy instinct to grow your world? How will you hear the small voice that matters most amidst the noise that matters not?

Part 2 - Voice

Chapter 6 - Limitless Inspiration

“Whether I went to school or not, I would always study.”
-RZA, Wu Tang Clan

Most people pass through life unaware of the infinite capabilities that lie within. For those who take the right steps, the mind can be used as a time machine, a crystal ball, and an abundant oasis of inspiration.

And you don’t need any special machine or expensive gadget to create this phenomenon. You just need a pen and paper.

“Long before there was the Internet,” writes Maria Popova, “there was the commonplace book - a creative and intellectual ledger of fragmentary inspirations, which a writer would collect from other books and copy into a notebook, often alongside his or her reflections and riffs. These borrowed ideas are in dialogue with the writer’s own imagination and foment it into original thinking.”

Imagine having everything that ever inspired you in one location. A conversation with a first crush. A favorite quote from a favorite author. That silly joke your grandfather told you. The book that changed your life, but only after the writing sunk in a decade later. It’s all there.

Popova adds, “Of the enormous volume of literature a reader devours in a lifetime, only a fraction - a deliberate, meticulously selected fraction - ends up in this sacred [commonplace] notebook, constructing a special kind of secondary world.”

All humans are changed and refined with every book they read, every movie they see, every conversation they have, and essentially every aspect of life they're open to accept, but with a commonplace book there's actually a paper trail from one thought to the next, from one revelation to the next.

"Over long enough a period of time - years, decades, often a lifetime - the commonplace books, while composed primarily of copied passengers comes to radiate the singular sensibility of its keeper: beliefs are refined, ideas incubated, intellectual fixations fleshed out, and the outlines of a personhood revealed," she writes.

Imagine filtering every great piece of writing you've ever read and forcing that information into the mind of one individual writer (hint: that's you and it's where your potential voice comes from).

With a project like this one, you have to be in it for the long haul. It takes a lot of time to fill a commonplace book and the work is never "done." But this is a good thing, because you're working on a craft, not trying to become famous on social media.

The commonplace book, when used like a journal, provides freedom and routine even amidst the most complex of positions.

Issac Newton referred to his commonplace as a "waste book." His biographer James Gleick wrote, "He set himself problems; considered them obsessively; calculated answers, and asked new questions. The plague year was his transfiguration. Solitary and almost incommunicado, he became the world's most paramount mathematician."

Creating a commonplace is relatively simple, but it can also be complex at the same time. For many people, it's sort of like keeping a diary. You might start writing about pain points, like a broken heart or a crush ignoring you at an early age, but hopefully, as your mind grows, so grows your thought process, your writing, and eventually, your published work.

When you come across something important, be it an anecdote, an idea, or a quote - jot it down. Organize it. Put it in its place. Then, allow the ideas to flow together. Allow the ideas to create new ideas. Allow the new ideas to be the scaffolding for your life's work.

Use the notes for reference, for writing books, for writing screenplays, for writing music. It doesn't matter. Just use it. Use it even when you can't use it. Sometimes, you're jotting down notes you don't fully understand because they're actually for your future self.

This idea is always applicable to things that are complex, but sometimes those complex ideas are actually quite simple, you've just yet to grasp their meaning. This is where the commonplace comes back in.

That advice from your grandmother might finally sink in...

That note from your teacher was applicable after all...

That book you struggled through in school really did change the way you think...

In other words, it doesn't matter how much you read, listen, watch, or discuss if you're not applying what you read to the grander scope of who you hope to one day become.

The best version of yourself is on the other side of this daily dedication to your craft.

A commonplace is the thread that runs through all of your work. As you find new ideas, you will become a better thinker. As you connect ideas, you will become a better writer.

Think of your collection as simply a central resource for ideas. As you find gems, plant them like seeds and let them grow into bigger and bigger aspirations.

Keeping a commonplace puts you in the company of thinkers such as Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon, HL Mencken, Bill Gates, Robert Greene, and Ryan Holiday, among many many others.

Holiday's advice for keeping a commonplace includes reading widely, highlighting passages in books, taking notes in the margins, looking for wisdom rather than facts, and looking at speeches, movies, videos, and conversations through the same lens.

If you find yourself reaching for your notebook during dinner parties, this is a good thing.

Personally, Holiday also uses 4x6 index cards (a practice he learned from his mentor Robert Greene), which he organizes by themes and categories. Then, he can physically move the cards around to figure out the best arrangement for the work. As an author, he simply connects the dots of the work to create new work and revise some of his thoughts to share with others.

"It's an honor to be given an idea," says Elizabeth Gilbert. "I feel like my life is in service of that." The same is true for discovering an idea. The way in

which it arrives is irrelevant. All that matters is how you use it (but you must use it).

If something doesn't sound original, it's because no writing is completely original. That said, when you start to connect the dots in a new way, you'll learn to be original and discover your own voice.

As a writer, it's when you mimic the past that you can step into the future.

Gilbert adds, "Good writing should be surprising yet inevitable." If your work is surprising but not inevitable, you haven't done enough research.

"You want to over prepare," she said in an interview. "There's an egolessness to the research." Gilbert only uses about 20 percent of the cards she creates, but all are necessary when she approaches a creative block. This way, when she reaches into her pile of cards, she finds yet another gift to continue her flow for the day. It's the distillation process that crafts the best work.

If you find yourself reaching for your notebook during nightly reads, this is a good thing.

Mythbusters star Adam Savage organizes his physical creativity in the same way. "When I was younger, if you'd told me to make a to-do list before I embarked on a project, I'd have rejected the idea out of hand. List making was the death of creativity!" he joked about his prior beliefs.

If you want to create at the scale at which Savage creates, you need an outline. You need organization. You need to be fully prepared and then some. There will be obstacles but there will also be solutions. The outline leads the way. Don't ignore it.

Sharpen the axe before you cut down the tree.
Brine the meat before you cook the meal.
Practice the speech before you take the stage.
Great aspirations require greater preparation.

"Making useful lists has been a lifelong process of refinement," writes Savage. "Graphic design helped me hone in on lists in outline form and as diagrams with pictorial references to clean up the mess of some of my earlier list-making tendencies. Don't get me wrong, those first messy lists were still useful, as any list is better than no list."

Over time, Savage has used lists to create projects such as Excalibur's sword, a 3D model of his house, a puppet, the gun from *The Fifth Element,* the Captain's Chair from *Star Trek,* and an array of cosplay items from cult classics like *Blade Runner.*

As he started to create projects that were more complex or took more time, he created lists within lists. He also uses a checkbox system rather than a physical strikethrough to keep the work clean and coherent in case he needs the research again or for something else entirely.

"The power and importance of the checkbox for me simply cannot be overstated. On the one hand, it speaks, as I've said, to the completist in me. The best part of making a list is, you guessed it, crossing things off. But when you physically cross them out, like with a pen, you can make them harder to read, which destroys their informational value beyond that single project and, to me at least, makes the whole thing feel incomplete."

He adds, "The checkbox allowed me to cross something off my list, to see clearly that I'd crossed it off,

and at the same time retain all its information while not also adding to the cognitive load of interpreting the list."

The point of all this isn't to deter you, but to encourage you. Making lists and using a commonplace book allows you to brain dump ideas, to organize those ideas into columns or chunks, to mediate those columns, to divide tasks into workable chunks, and even to take moments of rest without completely losing your momentum or your train of thought.

"A logical list combined with a system of checkboxes will bring order to even the most unruly and complex project," concludes Savage.

With a proper system in place, you can tackle projects that might normally feel beyond your grasp.

If you find yourself reaching for your notebook during seemingly boring lectures, this is a good thing.

Gideon Raff, creator of *The Spy* and *Homeland* told me, "I have thousands of notebooks. They feed future ideas and themes. When I start a project, I have a world of ideas that won't fit into a two-hour or four-hour story, but they're intruding enough to keep living in you. I find that writing them down in notebooks, they remain in you."

As you discover new ideas, you will unlock previous ideas that live within you. Sometimes the commonplace only provides a piece of the puzzle, but it could be the final piece you need.

"You should always collect more material than you will use," writes author William Zinsser. "Look for your material everywhere, not just by reading the obvious sources and interviewing the obvious people."

Over 2,000 years ago, Eratosthenes used shadows in a well to measure the circumference of Earth while others tried to circumnavigate the globe.

The beak of a kingfisher bird inspired the design of a bullet train as a result of the designer's hobby of birdwatching.

A 17-year-old teenager in Ohio designed the modern American flag with his imagination alone.

Expand your mind, then you can decide how to use the information.

"When choosing an idea for a book, make sure it's an idea that only a book can best represent," writes Chuck Palahniuk. "If it's an idea that films, comics, or gaming can depict, why bother writing the book?"

Palahniuk's books are often about characters who have reached the limits of their current condition. "They've been the good, obedient boy (*Fight Club*), or the stunningly attractive girl (*Invisible Monsters*) and they've reached the point where they must find a new form of power, or to continue, in bad faith, to live accordingly to the old, failing pattern."

Palahniuk comes up with his stories by writing down ideas and real humanistic traits that he sees in everyday life. "Watch what people do unconsciously. Collect the stories they tell to explain their behavior," he advises. "It's standard practice for writers to keep an everyday book, in which to jot down ideas or useful trivia, but the best stuff sticks in your brain until you find a place to showcase it."

Whether the author is filling in the pieces or starting from scratch, he's found his source of limitless inspiration. "By making ongoing notes throughout my

day, when I finally do sit down to write I have a pile of ideas. I'm not wasting my valuable creative time by starting from zero."

Another unique trick from Palahniuk is to collect a multitude of similar stories. He does this by chatting about unusual events at dinner parties. More often than not, his listeners chime in with their own versions of stories (which led to the short, "Guts"). The author calls it "crowd seeding."

Through real life situations, the author discovers that the unbelievable is more believable than most fiction. "Our existence is a constant flow of the impossible, the implausible, the coincidental. We're trained to live in constant denial of the miraculous. And it's only by telling our stories that we get any sense of how extraordinary human existence actually can be."

Like the thinkers listed previously, he also prefers to write his list by hand rather than using technology. In *Consider This*, he writes, "No electronic storage system is foolproof." And also there's something that feels inherently right about writing by hand.

"Develop a system for organizing your books and supplies," he suggests. "You won't dread handling paper correspondence if you have a stock of boxes, envelopes, a tape gun, and a designated table to work on. Being a writer consists of more than writing."

Once you create your commonplace, it's possible to juggle projects in a more productive manner. If you focus on an array of items, you will not suffer from any sort of creative block. Simply move from project to project, back and forth, up and down.

Photographer Chase Jarvis focuses on 5 projects at once, so he can work on 1 long-term project, 1 medium project, and 3 small projects. If this sounds overwhelming, it's not. In fact, it's quite the opposite, in the same way regular workouts actually give you more energy throughout the day.

In simple terms, this could simply mean writing a book, creating a speech, and writing a handful of blogs at the same time. Again, it's only overwhelming if you view it as overwhelming. In reality, it's freeing to move from inspiration to inspiration. What becomes overwhelming is trying to write one individual masterpiece.

You can think yourself into a corner.

No matter what though, eventually you also have to get to work. The commonplace is meant to be a tool, not an excuse to never start the actual work. When Abraham Lincoln spoke about sharpening an axe for four hours and cutting down a tree in two, he still had to cut down the tree. The axe only does so much of the work, but it's vital to get the job done.

"Often, after you have reviewed your notes many times and thought through your material, it is difficult to frame much of a structure until you write a lead," writes John McPhee. "You wade around your house, getting nowhere. You don't see a pattern. You don't know what to do. So stop everything. Stop looking at the notes. Hunt through your mind for a good beginning, then write it. Write a lead."

With proper focus, a system will fall into place. Again, it's important to make the world small. Break the work into pieces. Use selective ignorance as blinders to

focus on a single chapter, a single sentence, a single word. Repeat.

"If this sounds mechanical, its effect was absolutely the reverse," adds McPhee. "The procedure eliminated nearly all distraction and concentrated just the material I had to deal with in a given day. It painted me into a corner, yes, but in doing so freed me to write."

With pressure comes focus.

With focus comes better work.

Do the work that really matters.

While it's not always clear as to what the work will become, it will only become something if you're prepared to begin. Then, simply start.

Chapter 7 - Make It Personal

“I view authenticity like a totalitarian state.”
-David Chang, *Ugly Delicious*

According to Filmmaker Ken Burns, you only need two things to start any creative project. First, you need to have something to say. Second, you need to be willing to persevere.

It’s simple, but not easy, like walking the Appalachian Trail or swimming from the shore to an island in the distance. Like any great journey, when you make something truly personal, the reps are less important than the reason you’re doing it in the first place.

In other words, diligence is everything.

That said, personal work is often the farthest thing from any writer’s mind. It’s too precious. It’s too obvious. It’s too, well, personal.

We know ourselves so well and yet it’s the aspiration we strive for the least. Sure, we give it a shot as children perhaps, but as soon as ego kicks in, being personal in the public eye is just too daunting. (This is the same reason younger kids are actually more creative than older kids.)

But it’s through the personal that we find a voice in the first place.

If your work is missing something, aim within.

If you’re tired of seeing the same thing over and over again, inspire others to aim within.

“Hollywood is lacking original, good ideas,” said writer-director Jalmari Helander. “It’s time for original

ideas to bring something new to the screen. The business seems somewhat desperate. Let's hope they come along soon."

We're all preoccupied with that which does not satisfy. This is true for everything. Helander, specifically, is talking about the excessive amount of intellectual property, or IP, that makes its way to the big screen via the current Hollywood studio model.

In the early years, most films were original ideas. Then, it felt like a safe bet to make movies based on books (somewhere around 80+ percent). These days, it's easiest to focus on long-term franchises, one-off sequels, prequels, and everything in between.

Another blockbuster spinoff.

Another inadequate sequel.

Another unnecessary prequel.

There are a few reasons for this phenomenon, but the easiest answer is to blame the system itself. They're buying IP movies, so we're writing IP scripts. But every now and then, something original hits the screen and takes the world by storm. Sure, it's copied a million times shortly thereafter, but that spark is all anyone remembers.

The Sixth Sense was about a kid, but it wasn't a kid's movie.

Fight Club was satire posing as machismo action posing as satire.

The Blair Witch Project was found-footage so eerie that no one was sure if it was real or fake.

No one ever discovered greatness trying to merely copy someone else (and as the list above

proves, 1999 was perhaps the last great year at the box office).

When you reach for the stars, you don't end up with a hand full of mud.

Jason Sudekis said, "Aiming to be on [*Saturday Night Live*] will change the way you make your stuff. If you're trying to fit in, you're never going to be the shape you think you need to be. You're only going to be the shape you think you need to be. That goes for everything."

What shape is your work?

What shape inspires you?

What shape are you?

If you take this journey, you might find yourself still re-creating something already in the market because the market is huge, but deep down you'll know you can still make it your own.

"If it's authentic enough, believe me, it will feel original," says Elizabeth Gilbert.

The movies are the most notable example of this heartbreaking lack of authenticity, but it's in all forms of art. Art, after all, comes with a monetary value. This is complicated, but it's not the end of the world. The trick is to wear multiple hats, like a writer-producer or writer-director, but if that's too complicated in the beginning of your career, think of it this way: how can you create leverage as an artist?

Most people don't start off by wearing two metaphorical hats. Instead, they work up to this level, but they do so by creating leverage. Ironically, the leverage comes from something you already have, but have most likely ignored your entire life.

The leverage comes from you, your personal story, or at least your unique insight.

Tim Ferriss advises listeners to build businesses that “scratch their own itch.”

Kevin Kelly tells his readers: “Don’t be the best. Be the only.”

AFI teaches students to “write [their] way to the table.”

The list goes on and on, but it’s all about writing something personal, from the heart.

“I’ve written scripts where I get to the end of the first draft and it feels pretty dead. It doesn’t have the sense of fun or the sense of a strong character in it. I think when my screenplays don’t work, it has to do with the characters being the idea of a person, rather than actually letting them be a person,” says Mattson Tomlin, screenwriter of *Project Power* and *The Batman.*

Whenever Tomlin gets stuck on something, he literally looks down at his hand, where he has a tattoo that reads “Who cares?” This doesn’t mean shrugging off something, but instead examining “who cares” about what’s happening on the screen. Who does this affect? What does this do for the audience?

“For me, ‘who cares’ is another way of saying ‘so what?’ It’s the prompt I give myself while writing, to strip back the layers and hit that raw nerve. If I can find the ‘who cares’ of an idea, then I know it will be somewhat universal, somewhat primal, so if it connects to me, it will connect to others as well,” he says.

Tomlin continues, “If it doesn’t have that, I haven’t done my work. I’ve got to keep working to find that ‘who cares.’ Everybody has a story and we all go

through certain types of pain and joy. There are human experiences we all share, one way or another."

The human experience is the only reason the scaffolding matters in the first place. Without it, your project is nothing more than scaffolding. Don't be so good at the prep that you forget to finish the original goal. Don't forget to share your voice.

"You can construct a rock-solid three-act structure, but if there isn't a heartbeat in the center of it, your viewers aren't going to be engaged," says Sam Shaw, writer of *Manhattan* and the Stephen King-inspired series, *Castle Rock.*

The rules matter, yes, but so does the emotion.

"It's just you and your keyboard," says Michael Lannan. "People will offer you all types of opinions, but they don't really know anything. They don't know what the world that you are trying to communicate is. They will tell you if it fits into the marketplace or not, but if you have a burning passion for your world, then the only person that knows anything is you."

Lannan continues, "I've seen writers who are clearly working on something so beautiful and so personal that it scares them, so they turn to another project or idea that fits the compatibility of the marketplace and what people are buying. But that personal thing is usually the most amazon thing I have ever read of theirs."

The things that matter matter because they make a connection.

The things that matter matter because they are authentic.

The things that matter matter because they are undeniably true.

“If you make it as human as possible, as local as possible, as true to the place as possible, somehow the universal themes come out and speak to many,” says writer Gideon Raff.

“Screenwriters need to have compassion for themselves. In the beginning, the drafts are not as good as you want them to be, and it’s all about sitting down and continuing, continuing, continuing, until you feel in your gut that it’s ready to show.”

Raff believes in the personalness of the story more than anything else (such as eventual runtime or number of episodes). “People are more open to different formats. The story dictates the length. There’s no obligation to hit a certain number of episodes and that’s freeing. Tell it the way you want to tell it.”

Then the themes will reveal themselves.

It’s important to understand this is different for everyone.

But it’s also important to know what that means for you.

“I’ve always been drawn to stories about violence and religion in the South, where those things intersect and explode; where they crash together; the good and the bad,” admits director Scott Teems. “Those ideas are intertwined. I’m quite repulsed by agenda-driven stories that feel like propaganda.”

In one of Teems’ works called *The Quarry,* the film is both a large and small story packed into one. “It’s about guilt and conscience and sin. It’s also a small,

personal story about a guy carrying a burden. I like the idea of combining the epic and the intimate."

Screenwriter Misha Green took on the difficult job of bringing slavery to television with *Underground:* *"*Follow the story you want to tell. I think that when people try to mold their story sensibilities into what they've already seen on screen, that's where things get a little bit lost. We want new stories, we're all craving it. Keep writing the things that you want to write, because other people will love it too."

She adds, "With historical fiction, you have to always navigate the landmines of truth, of what really happened in that time, even though you can have characters whose truth is different from what happened."

Tomlin, Teems, Lannan, Shaw, and Green are very different writers who are interested in very different subjects, but the truth in their stories is the same. It's meant to be personal.

This is why trends don't matter.

This is why your work must be a representation of you.

This is why you are the only person who can create the next trend.

(And if you don't, that doesn't matter either.)

"Whatever the trend is now, when you finish your script, the trend is going to be something else," explains screenwriter Jessica Sharzer. "Trying to second guess the market is a fool's errand."

Underneath everything else, the story must be human not trendy, real not replicated, personal not bankable. (Don't worry though, the money does come later.)

“I’m drawn to human stories disguised as universe-creation, from *The Incredible Hulk* to *Dark Crystal* to *Now You See Me*,” says Louis Leterrier, the director of these films. “I always tell stories about small, normal people that are pushed into the roaring river of life’s adventure. I’m also French, so I love the reluctant hero.”

So if we can make the big stories personal, logically we should also be able to make the small stories personal, right? If *The Incredible Hulk* can be somewhat realistic, what should that mean about your personal essay? Your short story? Your song? Your poem?

“Most memoirs fail because of voice,” says memoirist Mary Karr. “It’s not distinct enough to sound alive and compelling, or there are staunch limits to emotional tone, so it emits a single register. Being too cool or too shrill can ruin the read. You don’t believe or trust the voice. You’re not curious about the inner or outer lives of the writer. The author’s dead in the water.”

Karr also believes this important truth: “Each great memoir lives or dies based 100 percent on voice.” For her, this means looking at her own life in a therapeutic manner. “The sharpest memories often give me the spooky sense of looking out from former eyeholes at a landscape decades-since gone.”

It’s through these various points of vision that she’s able to see herself in a new way. “You’ll need both sides of yourself - the beautiful and the beastly - to hold a reader’s attention.”

But it’s not enough even to evaluate yourself from an outside objective alone. You have to dig deep

enough to find the truth within joy, or pain, or heartache. You have to understand that most of the beautiful things in your life came from some form of heartbreak suffered long ago.

"Everybody I know who wades deep enough into memory's waters drowns a little," writes Karr.

Then, you have to come back to the other side, which is likely where the quote attributed to Hemingway about sitting at the typewriter to bleed came from. Through the pain comes the discovery. Through the discovery comes the voice.

If this sounds difficult to you, it is, but the real crime is in not telling your story. As Zora Neale Hurston says, "If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it."

If you have the luxury of writing about another person's pain instead of your own, the key is to ask questions, but also to leave room for answers.

"I have no technique in asking questions," shares John McPhee. "I just stay there and fade away as I watch people do what they do." He adds, "I'd much rather watch people do what they do than talk to them across a desk."

If you can notice these traits in other people, you can notice them in yourself.

Separating who you are, what you do, and how you perform means everything. It even helps you better understand the written word.

Professor James Wood writes, "Literature differs from life in that life is amorphously full of detail, and rarely directs us towards it, where literature makes us better noticers of life, which in turn makes us better

readers of literature, which in turn makes us better readers of life."

For those hesitant to tell the stories of others, you have to remember they're a part of your story. Sometimes you're the hero. Sometimes you're the heavy. Either way, you own that which happens to you. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. It's your story.

"You own everything that happened to you," writes Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird*. "Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better."

Lamott adds, "Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you're a writer you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act - truth is always subversive."

But, at the same time, you must understand the risk you are taking. That's the tightrope walk of being a professional truth-teller. You need to tell the truth, but only if the truth matters. Lamott concludes, "You don't always have to chop with the sword of truth. You can point with it too."

Know how to understand the truth.

Know when to shine a light.

Know when to pull the trigger.

Once you understand these truths, you can learn something else about yourself. In fact, it's one of the most important aspects you can ever learn: You are not your work. And with that, you are also not your pain.

Write personal work, but don't take criticism personally.

“I don’t choose to stay in one particular paragraph of my story. It’s a long story,” says comedian Kevin Hart about dealing with the trauma of youth.

Hart, among others listed in this chapter, is talking about avoiding labels to be yourself. You are not male. You are not female. You are not black, white, Asian, or Hispanic. You are not even a writer. You are just yourself at the keyboard, performing the act of writing. That’s all that matters in any given moment of work.

“If you consciously write for a teacher or for an editor, you’ll end up not writing for anybody. If you write for yourself, you’ll reach the people you want to write for,” states William Zinsser. “You are writing for yourself. Don’t try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience - every reader is a different person.”

He continues, “[Writers] are driven by a compulsion to put some part of themselves on paper, and yet they don’t just write what comes naturally. They sit down to commit an act of literature, and the self who emerges on paper is far stiffer than the person who sat down to write. The problem is to find the real man or woman behind the tension.”

He continues, “Of all the subjects available to you as a writer, the one you know best is yourself: your past and your present, your thoughts and your emotions, yet it’s probably the subject you try hardest to avoid. As for any form of creative block. You’ll find the solution if you look for the human element.”

The writers who stick to their personal guns are inevitably the most relatable.

Liz Feldman, creator of *Dead to Me*, gives this advice, “Be true to yourself. Look inside yourself. Go to the place that makes you uncomfortable and vulnerable and mine that, because that’s yours. Only you have that story. Only you have that feeling. And, there is an audience for it.”

This means examining individual scenes, but also beyond the current story. “Try to visualize your show far into the future. You need to find the legs of your show before you’re asked to. When I allow myself to tell a story like *Dead to Me,* which comes from a really personal, vulnerable place - including subject matter I’d rather not talk about - when I force myself to go there, I think my best work has come out,” she said of the Netflix dramedy.

“What are these characters feeling and going through?” she will ask herself. “So often, that leads you to where the twist or turn reveals itself. I always want to answer the question, ‘Would the character do this?’ The answer has to be ‘Yes.’”

With this in mind, even when you’re writing fiction, you’re still writing the truth. Author Chuck Palahniuk writes, “Getting inside a character might seem like a vacation from being you, but face it, you’re never not you.”

Once you do all of this, mining the pain will help you avoid some of those feelings of vulnerability. As author James Clear said, “Not taking things personally is a superpower.” When your audience arrives, will you wear an “S” on your chest or wear your heart on your sleeve?

Chapter 8 - Deep Preparation

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”
-Benjamin Franklin

The only way to really make anything worth a damn is to spend a great deal of time doing it. Not just time writing, of course, but time researching, time thinking, time lost in thought, time away from the work, and even time specifically not writing - all in an effort just to make something worth reading, worth sharing, and worth continuing to read.

This is no revelation. Maybe it’s even a disappointment. But it’s the simple reality any way you look at it. If you seek the attention of readers, you need to properly prepare the work. You want these readers’ attention, and maybe they want to give it to you, but like any first impression, you have to show up with everything you’ve got.

Great writing takes a great deal of time and you have to sludge through a great deal of junk to find something remarkable. But before embarking on such an expedition, it’s vital to understand the importance of deep preparation.

Paul Levesque (better known as Triple H among the professional wrestling community) once went to see his friend, boxer Floyd Mayweather, who was preparing for a big fight against Juan Manuel Marquez. According to Levesque, Maywhether told him to stop by before the fight. But while walking backstage with his wife, he became hesitant to disrupt the fighter's mental state before the match.

"All right, man," he told the boxer. "We're gonna get outta your hair and head back." Mayweather replied, "Man, you don't gotta take off. You can sit down. I'm enjoying the conversation." Still worried he was disrupting the boxer's process, Levesque once again insisted on getting out of his way.

The boxer clarified, "Why would I be wound up? I'm either ready, or I'm not. Worrying about it right now ain't gonna change a damn thing, right? Whatever's gonna happen is gonna happen. So I've either done everything I can to be ready for this, or I'm not."

Mayweather has a record of 49-0 with 26 knockouts (apparently nothing winds him up). This type of mental state only comes from deep preparation. As writers, making your work bulletproof means building strong bones.

Remember how your favorite movie unveiled a perfectly executed cliffhanger? Strong bones.

Remember how your favorite novel displayed hidden clues in plain sight? Strong bones.

Remember the tenth time you watched your favorite show and saw something you never noticed before? Strong bones.

“Make sure the bones are strong,” says creative Jeffrey Addis. “Make sure you can bend those bones, jump on them, and rearrange them so they don’t break, because that will carry you through everything."

“We can change the nose or swap out the eye,” he says, referring to the creatures that live within Jim Henson’s *Dark Crystal* series. “How a character gets from Point A to Point B can change, but we know why they have to get to Point B, because of what that means

emotionally. That's the bones. That's the arch. That's the story."

Through preparation, you can build something wherein the finished product may even feel beyond your capabilities. You just need the intention to do so, and then you have to put in the work.

Iconic advertiser David Ogilvy said, "When I write an advertisement, I don't want you to tell me that you find it creative, I want you to find it so interesting that you buy the product. When Aeschines spoke, they said how well he spoke, but when Demosthenes spoke, they said, 'Let us march against Philip.'"

Ogilvy would tell you that your message is everything.

Your message is what makes the work worth reading. It's what validates seeking someone else's attention. It's what connects one sentence to the next one. It doesn't just make people buy stuff. It makes them join tribes, start revolutions, and change their lives for the greater good.

But where do you begin?

To start, focus on the central dilemma.

"What's the central dilemma you're writing about?" asks Blake Masters, screenwriter of the Denzel Washington-Mark Wahlberg film *2 Guns.* "You don't go from the details in. Start with their opinion and then decide what that would look like. All of a sudden, you have characters where the details aren't extraneous ornaments on a Christmas tree - they are the tree."

In Blake's specific example, he said Washington's character would do whatever it takes to get the job done (meaning he's somewhat ruthless)

while Wahlberg's character had a set of strict morals (meaning he's somewhat innocent). This simple dynamic not only defined the characters, but created all of the humor and action in the film.

Through one decision, all other choices fall in line.

William Zinsser believes in the central dilemma or focal point of a given location. "Your main task as a travel writer is to find the central idea of the place you're dealing with."

Ira Levin believes in story elements to create character. "Great problems, not clever solutions make great fiction."

Mary Karr believes truth is the only thing that matters. "Truth may have become a foggy, fuzzy nether area, but untruth is simple: making up events with the intention to deceive."

She also says, "Truth is not their enemy. It's the bannister they grab for when feeling around on the dark cellar stairs. It's the solution." Truth is what makes a memoir worth reading. "Memoir done right is an art, a made thing. It's not just raw reportage flung splat on the page. From the second you choose one event over another, you're shaping the past's meaning."

For each of these writers, there is one rule that eliminates thousands of choices. Discovering the single rule in your own work comes from deep preparation. This isn't just for writers. It's true for everyone in every occupation.

"That's all the motorcycle is, a system of concepts worked out in steel," writes Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. "The

physical labor is the smallest and easiest part of what the mechanic does. By far the greatest part of his work is careful observation and precise thinking."

Careful observation.

Precise thinking.

Anything less is hardly writing, but that doesn't mean you can afford to put unnecessary pressure on yourself. You just need to block out the hours to put in the work.

Pressure yourself to sit at your desk, but not to make the best seller list.

Pressure yourself to write your scenes, but not to sell the movie.

Pressure yourself to write and write and write, but not to sell and sell and sell.

If you focus on the practice, the results will inevitably follow.

"I'm really big on deep preparation," shares Luke Davies. "I don't leave things unexplained and I don't write short treatments that are four bullet points. I really try to flesh out the story, because when you're writing the script, and you've got this detailed framework, it frees you up more in the creative space to actually write and find exciting discoveries."

The harsh truth? If your work is lacking, it's because your preparation was lacking.

You aren't your work when it's being judged, but it's your responsibility to bring your absolute best effort to the table every single day. Like an actor going in for an audition, there's a moment when everything you do is your responsibility. That's the draft stage. It's your job to make it better or make it worse, before outside opinion -

from critics or even mentors - takes hold of your work and turns it into something else.

When you totally own it, it's freeing to hand it over to your readers, or your editor, or your fans, but you need to feel confident when you pass the reins. You need to deliver your absolute best.

Getting hung up on structure or other rules of writing will limit your capabilities. The reader isn't meant to notice the structure. If the reader notices the structure, the work is lacking. "[Structure] is meant to be about as visible as someone's bones," says John McPhee.

Write freely.

Make it personal.

Then revise it to fit whatever rules you need to fit (but again, this is the last step).

"What you're looking for is a story which is firing on all cylinders, an engine that's attractive in its ability to contain a lot of power," observes Ken Burns. "The engagement of that will also hold up a mirror to you."

Once you fully engage in the work, you can see what works and what doesn't work.

"We should apply the test of convenience. Does the word fill a real need?" asks Theodore Bernstein. "If it does, let's give it a franchise."

There are many unearned franchises today (to say the least) but being popular isn't everything. At the highest level - meaning how writers are viewed among other writers - your peers will know the truth about your deep preparation. They might not love your style, but they'll know you either did the work or you didn't.

Then, when you better learn to prepare, you will inevitably become more prolific, and increase the odds of your work reaching a larger audience.

What's the point of all this? Writing is a craft, but it's also a system. Without your own unique formula, you will remain a hobbyist rather than a professional. And, in the end, any barrier you hit is just a place for your competition to stop, even when the barrier is that of your mentor or favorite author carefully crushing your dreams.

"No matter how much I want to encourage the man or woman trying for the first time to write seriously, I can't lie and say there are no bad writers," says Stephen King, perhaps the most prolific writer in history.

"Sorry, but there are lots of bad writers. Some are on-staff at your local newspaper, usually reviewing little theater productions or pontificating about the local sports teams. Some have scribbled their way to homes in the Caribbean, leaving a trail of pulsing adverbs, wooden characters, and vile passive-voice constructions behind them."

If this quote scares you, it's because you have failed to prepare. But worry not, because every day is a new day to put in the work. If you're a serious writer, daily time at the desk is not just an opportunity but an obligation.

The things that make you want to throw in the towel are the exact things that should keep you going. It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, anyone could do it. Because it's hard, it's worth all of the hours that go into it.

“You have to bleed for it,” says Mattson Tomlin. “Time only gets wasted if you’re looking for an immediate result. I look at my process and I look at everything I’ve gone through and I get why it took all the steps that it took and I wouldn’t give those steps up.”

Those steps are what will take you from good to great.

Those steps are really the only thing that matter.

Without taking those steps, you’ll never really know how to tame the blank page.

“The competition to get on the [Harvard] Lampoon operates exactly like the TV business,” *The Simpsons* writer Mike Reiss told me. “Students competing are expected to turn in six humorous articles in eight weeks, which teaches you to hit deadlines and be prolific, two fundamental skills in television.”

Seek deep preparation.

Hit deadlines.

Be prolific.

When we think back to Mayweather in the moments leading up to the fight, we are forced to think of the reps it took him to become the world’s greatest.

Luckily, as writers, we can train alone, in the gentle glow of the laptop or by the fluttering hum of a moving keyboard rather than in the ring with physical blood, sweat, and tears.

We have to find a hundred ways to say the same thing, then do it all over again the next day. But that’s what we signed up for, right?

So if you view writing as the opportunity to get punched in the face over and over again, you’re not wrong, but you can also not forget to smile through the

pain. You don’t have to do it. You get to do it. Like boxers, writers must put in the reps. It’s your fight to win. It’s your title to earn.

Chapter 9 - Away From the Desk

“You waste years by not being able to waste hours.”
-Amos Tversky

As you know, preparation is everything, but there’s still another factor that separates lifetime writers from online hobbyists: space. It’s the amount of time between the words, or the white space from project to project, idea to idea, creation to creation.

“We spent probably two weeks writing out the biographies of each and every one of the characters,” said Dan Levy about his comedy series *Schitt’s Creek.* “That was one of the greatest gifts my dad (Eugene Levy) gave me, because I just really wanted to write and he was the one who said that we needed to take the time to figure out who the people are first, and that the writing was last, the icing on the cake.”

When you’ve gone through all of your notes and there’s still something missing, sometimes the only thing left to do is step away from the work. This is an area of writing that’s rarely talked about because it can feel like giving up.

Sometimes people think they’re suffering from writer’s block, when it’s merely writer’s fatigue.

However, if you’re truly stuck, sometimes it just takes a little time.

When you put in the hours, work on more than one project at a time, and set a determined schedule, you can start to develop the wisdom to know when you’re hitting a wall or when you’re just being lazy. More

often than not, it's the latter, but sometimes you just need recovery from the grind.

"I found moments of peace in cheap rooms just staring at the knobs of some dresser or listening to the rain in the dark. The less I needed the better I felt," says writer Charles Bukowski.

The same is true when you're digging through old files, shifting through note cards, or reading previously crumbled legal pad notes and simply can't put your finger on what should happen next or how to make a smooth transition between point to point.

This road block doesn't mean you should go watch television for twelve hours, scroll through social media again, or leave your laptop at home and go away every other weekend. What it means is that you might need to take a walk, or read something in a similar genre, or do the dishes, or literally just get some sleep.

The trick is letting your subconscious work on the problem while you're sleeping or doing some mindless task. Like any job, the revelations generally come between sprints of work.

Your subconscious is at work for you, in the same manner you don't have to think about when you need to breathe or blink.

If you can force problem-solving into off-mode, then your on-mode will grow to unforeseen levels of creativity.

"My office looks like an episode of *Hoarders,* with an overflowing collection of books and papers," jokes Sam Shaw. "Sometimes research can be a way of procrastinating, but I have to think my way into whatever I'm about to write. There is a lot of reading, pacing, and

walking. Then, when I have the loaded gun of a deadline to my head, I dive in and write a first draft as quickly as I can."

It's during the pacing and walking that the best ideas often rise to the surface.

"The best ideas come when I'm not writing," says Jalmari Helander. "I try to remember that you don't need to bang your head in an office, but you can actually do something else which will be more useful for your day and your writing. Sometimes you need to do something else to figure out your writing problem."

Saying "something else" isn't exactly a formula for success, but the best writers and thinkers seem to focus on repetitive, simple tasks as a break from the intense focus it takes to put words on the page.

Albert Einstein kept his job at a patent office to free his mind.

David Sedaris famously walks miles and miles picking up garbage every single day.

Tim Ferriss "brain dumps" mindless thoughts into a "morning pages" journal to clear his mind and get his day started with a fresh perspective.

Through the oddities of rest and reserve, you can find something unique. "Art is where you find it," says John McPhee. "Fiction, in my view, is much harder to do than fact, because the fiction writer moves forward by trial and error, while the fact writer is working with a certain body of collected material, and can set up structure beforehand."

If fiction is your calling, put in the work.

If memoirs are your calling, put in the work.

“A fiction writer starts with meaning and then manufacturers events to represent it; a memoirist starts with events, then derives meaning from them,” writes Mary Karr.

Sometimes, you need the moments of rest even when your outline is perfect.

Sometimes, there’s even more to the story that only comes from time away from the project.

Sometimes, you just need to close your eyes while the story finds you.

“I can’t say ‘Here are the twelve steps you need to make a perfect film,’” admits Ken Burns, “but I can tell you that keeping an investigative curiosity going delivers you stuff you never thought you’d get.”

Burns likes to jump between phases to keep the work fresh. He doesn’t necessarily focus on research, then filmmaking, then editing. Research will often creep its way into the story throughout the process, over and over again. At other times, a subject will simply unlock something that changes the entire dynamic of his documentary series.

From this unique perspective, he's been able to cover vast topics such as The Civil War, Thomas Jefferson, Frank Lloyd Wright, Jazz, Baseball, The Dust Bowl, Jackie Robinson, The Vietnam War, Country Music, and Muhammad Ali (while putting his personal touch on each).

The same idea is true for collaboration, as projects like films or even books with great editors require a sort of collaboration to connect with an audience. Burns says, “Filmmaking is always

symphonic, that is to say, it's multiple instruments working at the same time."

These days, Burns is also more of a producer for many projects, so he's gone from freelance filmmaker to entrepreneur filmmaker where he now hires the best of the best to bring his projects and visions to life. This isn't for everyone, but it's one way to evolve your work as an artist, or what Dan Sullivan might call the *Who Not How* method.

Time away from the work creates a reward, as the words then start to flow. When the words start to flow, another reward of rest follows. It's a circular motion of creativity. The rest allows for the work to flow. The work creates peace of mind to get some rest.

It's the same as a workout. The muscles actually grow during recovery. If you recover well, you can bring more to your workout in a circular motion of ambition.

"When I do manage to carve out space, it's a sense of reward," muses Luke Davies. "I'm going to switch my brain off for a while. A month would be beautiful [where] I just jump in the ocean several times a day. It's a nice experience when you let go, but there's also anxiety of 'I hope they understand this.' I think you just have to make peace with that. Everything moves forward and you keep working and look forward to the next thing if the last thing didn't work."

With this mindset of stoicism, not only do you get to relax, but you get to stop worrying about the success and failure of any given project. There are several irons in the fire rather than one chance at success.

Research.

Write.

Recover.

Repeat.

If you can't enjoy this ferris wheel of a journey, then there's no room at the table for you, but if you embrace the idea, you can write as long as your body and mind allow you to do so, and with the optimism that you will find great success among the failures.

"I go through life assuming nothing is going to work out," confesses Mattson Tomlin. Whether you call it stoicism or pessimism, assuming nothing will happen actually helps the journey. "That's served me well because a lot of things don't work out. For every success that I've had, there have literally been ten failures behind it. I don't let those failures trip me up."

"If I get a call that says, 'This thing you've been working on for three years isn't happening - sorry.' That hurts and it stings, but I don't let it stop me. That's fine because I'm already working on my next five things anyway."

Tomlin adds, "You have to have the resiliency to get back up. The quicker you get back up, the more productive you can be. You can take more shots because you're up on the ground more."

Through rest comes resiliency, but you must have the wisdom to know the difference between when you need a break and when you're giving an excuse. In some ways, it's more about how often this barrier steps in your path.

Writers like David Sedaris find stories by exploring life. He says, "Be engaged with the world and [the subject] will sit in your lap." Sedaris does this in a number of ways that work for him. He makes sure to speak to cab drivers, thousands of fans, everyone he comes across at a dinner party, and then he starts to ask them intriguing questions.

“Have you touched a monkey recently?” he asked one woman, who ironically responded, “Oh, can you smell it on me?” (It turns out she worked with animals, nothing too strange here but that’s the sort of insanity you need to think about to write compelling personal essays).

For Sedaris, this isn’t work. It’s what comes between the work to inspire more work. He also likes to guess people’s ages, which he claims to be good at because he might do it for a few thousand people while signing autographs at his lectures (Sedaris also workshops his stories like a comedian by telling them in front of live audiences and literally crossing out sections or making adjustments at the podium in real time - that’s commitment to craft).

Other writers find rest in different types of creative freedoms. Many great writers are also bad artists. Visual arts help express what later becomes incredible prose.

David Lynch likes to paint.

Truman Capote liked to make collages.

Kurt Vonnegut liked to draw.

“In terms of resting my brain, I might pick up a paint brush or pencil, which slows everything down,” says cinematographer Trevor Forrest. “Painting is slower in terms of progress, but I think it teaches you more about the details. Photography teaches you about time, moments, emotions, and catching those emotions in the moment.”

So, whether it’s actual rest, playing video games, sketching, walking around your neighborhood, or anything in between, allow your mind to wander so the words find their way back to you.

In other words, if you find yourself overly busy, it’s a problem, not a solution.

You need to work on multiple projects so you can transition from inspiration to inspiration, but if you're doing too much work merely for the paycheck (meaning work that doesn't inspire you), it's time to cut back. The paycheck you seek will come if you allow room to breathe.

"The secret of doing good research is always to be a little underemployed," says the character Amos Tversky in Michael Lewis' novel *Up.* "You waste years by not being able to waste hours."

Waste time watching a movie with your spouse.

Waste time growing and pruning a pristine garden.

Waste time reading a favorite novel in your favorite coffee shop.

But then get back to work.

"Your subconscious mind does more writing than you think," writes William Zinsser. "While you slept, your writer's mind didn't. A writer is always working."

At the same time, just because your mind is on overload doesn't mean you can jump right back into something after a major goal. Find your time to rest or you will inevitably burnout. As Lewis Carroll says, "At any given time, I usually have eight new ideas. I need time between projects. It's like a tank filling up. I can't just go from one to the other."

Think about your points of rest as a simple course correction for the mind. If an airplane wishes to fly around the globe, it has to course correct the entire time. On a trip of that length, veering off one degree would mean arriving 500 miles away from the desired destination.

The same is true for rest and recovery.

Without course correcting from time to time, you will inevitably find yourself on the wrong route. What's worse? You are potentially setting yourself up to crash and burn.

Chapter 10 - Embrace the Risk

“To ask is a temporary shame,
not to ask a lifelong shame.”
-Japanese Proverb

When you're learning to develop your voice, it's important to understand where inspiration comes from, how to make it personal, how to dive deeply into the research, and also how to rest between sprints of work.

At the same time, however, the only true way to discover voice - and expand to something authentic and real - is to take new risks.

New forms of risk bring the possibility of failure, but also showcase the limitations of your current capabilities.

Without risk, there is no clear path forward.

Risk showcases the limitations of your capabilities, but also invites you to extend beyond any preconceived limitations.

When you know where you stand, you know which way to push the boundaries.

In this new state lies your voice.

“The goal of a voice is to speak not with objective authority, but with subjective curiosity,” says Mary Karr.

Over time, curiosity turns amateurs into professionals. Some of the most famous intellectuals are known for sharing their climbs to success. They stumbled along the way. They failed more than they succeeded. Because of this failure, they found success.

Honestly, you only win because you fail more than those around you.

Every hurdle you pass and failure from which you arise pinpoints a spot where someone else will quit.

When you embrace the risk of failure, immerse yourself in the process, and keep trying new things, you stretch your mind, callous your fears, and shed the old version of yourself. But, you have to embrace new risks, over and over again, to avoid becoming stale.

“Get your hands on a camera and get immersed in the process,” Jeff Cronenweth told me. The Cinematographer for David Fincher said, “Every time you shoot something, mistakes or not, you’re going to walk away with knowledge.”

Over the course of Cronenweth’s career, he not only learned how to make better films, but how to be focused on the endgame, yet flexible in the process. “I think I was pretty regimented before,” he told me. “I was less open to being fluid. I thought you had to have a perfect plan and you had to execute it in a certain way. The older I got, the more flexible I got. There are so many ways of making beautiful images. The story will tell you what it wants to be. If you apply yourself, you’ll discover what that is.”

He concluded, “Budgets are changing, schedules are faster. The invention of HD and Digital Photography, in some ways, has taken the mystique from what the photochemical process used to be. You find yourself pushed into things with expectations that are grander, so it’s an adapting thing as the equipment changes and as the industry changes.”

As your industry changes, you must change with it. Doing so could mean you're the next person to literally alter your industry for the better. To be an innovator, you need to see the future version that you're chasing yourself, but you don't necessarily need to see the exact order in which this audacious goal will be achieved.

Focus on what needs to remain the same, but be flexible enough to know when and how to change. If you do not fear the disruption in your industry, you can be the disruption in your industry. This is what separates professionals from amateurs.

You don't need permission.

You don't need a certificate.

You don't need a degree.

You just need to put in the work and embrace new risks, day after day.

"Pros are just amateurs who know how to gracefully recover from their mistakes," says innovator Kevin Kelly.

Recovery means more than just bouncing back. Recovery is about putting yourself in a position where the dangers of individual risk are literally less dangerous. This could mean putting more irons in the fire, but it could also mean creating a shield around the part of your mind that is subject to fear, as that part of the mind no longer serves you in the way it served your ancestors.

In short, there's nothing on the other side of fear.

Fear was instilled in humans to protect us from real dangers, but now we use it to avoid risks. Kill those

nerves that send fear throughout your body to become a different person.

As Vince Vaughn said about the auditioning phase: “When you don’t get it, your day the next day doesn’t change, you are just a person with the same credits you had. So there was a lot of time and energy spent to get to that moment, and if it didn’t pan out you were no more castable as a known entity than what you were…”

“So what would happen was when you would get that close and it wouldn’t happen, at first I would get down, and I would take four or five days and I would just not do anything. I’d lose my energy. Then I started to realize that the week I took off was really two weeks; that it was a week of not getting better, and it was a week of getting worse.”

“Now I’ve given myself two weeks less to improve at the things I am in control of,” he concluded. “I started looking at it like a percentage game; the more I worked on things, my percentages would go up. What I realized later was it gave you a confidence to feel like you belong there.”

You have to give yourself permission to perform in areas where you feel uncomfortable because it’s the darkest, deepest caves that possess the most treasure.

You already have everything you need to uncover that which you seek.

If there are any real barriers, they’re inside your mind.

Not only do you have to give yourself this permission, you have to do it as quickly as possible. In

fact, if you're not experiencing anxiety, the risk you're taking likely isn't worthy of your time.

If you spend too much time focusing on your discomforts and pains, you're killing your possibilities. If you're spending too much time wishing for a better future, you're not taking enough action.

To truly kill those fears within, it's vital to act as if success is inevitable.

“To enjoy bodily warmth,” writes Herman Melville, “some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself. If you flatter yourself that you are all over comfortable, and have been so a long time, then you cannot be said to be comfortable any more.”

Within pain lies growth.

As you explore new fields, you will find yourself feeling like an amateur all over again, but that’s the point. It’s that which makes you uncomfortable that prods you towards something drastically better. Or, as Ernest Hemingway so eloquently put it: “The first draft of anything is always shit.”

At the same time, there’s always a variety of truth within conventional wisdom.

When Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address (one of the most famous documents ever written), his hometown newspaper called it “dishwater utterances.”

“In each production,” says Ken Burns, “my molecules are completely rearranged. That’s a good thing. Making a film is like confronting a million

problems. It's industrial manufacturing of anxiety. There are things that will go wrong and that's human."

He continues, "The biggest thing you can do is anticipate and welcome the inevitable problems that will occur. Permit that to be an exercise in transcendence. Take out the reaction and transform the seemingly negative energy. It's patience of process."

Embrace the risk; understand the process.

Embrace the process; chase new risks.

"Failing on any scale is better than not trying in the first place," says Photographer Chase Jarvis (and countless other creatives across space and time). "Nothing happens when efforts stop."

Comedian Ellen DeGeneres said, "When you take risks you learn that there will be times when you succeed and there will be times when you fail, and both are equally important."

The risk of failure is what makes you a writer.

The risk of failure is what makes you prolific.

"If you don't publish, you really don't have the experience of writing," said actor Ethan Hawke about publishing his first novel. "It's giving it away to other people and passing through the gauntlet. Publishing makes you a writer."

Publishing might mean getting an agent.

Publishing might mean hitting "Send."

Publishing might mean typing "The End."

Whatever publishing means to you, it's inevitable to your success.

Publish. Publish. Publish.

The positive thing about writing - over say big wave surfing or free climbing - is that failure isn't actually

death, even when it feels like death. The same segments of the brain light up, and the same fears of failure are there, but the true fear does not actually result in anything that you can't fully recover from and continue the work.

"Pushing through is courage," says big wave surfer Nic Lamb. "Pushing back is regret."

"The only way to deal with [pain] is practice," says free solo climber Alex Honnold. "I get used to it during training so that when it happens on big climbs, it feels normal."

When the uncomfortable becomes comfortable, success is inevitable.

"It's about sorting out perceived risk from real risk, and then being as rational as possible with what's left," says Alex Honnold's photographer and fellow climber, Jimmy Chin.

In writing, failure is merely experimentation of the craft. In fact, if you're hitting too many greenlights with your work, it's because you're not pushing the boundaries of your own capabilities enough.

When you change the definition of failure, you remove its power over you.

Experiment with that which excites you, but disregard the new information on an emotional level, meaning it matters not if you pass or fail. Instead, use this new information to better serve your readers, viewers, or tribe.

Write for you first, then serve your audience, but understand who you are writing for and disregard the critics because critics can only critique from a level

below you. No one above you has the time to critique novice writers. They're too busy putting in the work.

"He who jumps into the void owes no explanation to those who stand and watch," says Jean-Luc Godard.

With this new mentality, it's possible to view your writing and therefore your subjects in a new light. Mark Manson refers to this with the question, "How do you choose to suffer?"

When you "suffer" for the right reasons, your voice will be the strongest part of your body. Then, you can remove those aspects of fear and limitation created within the mind. As Kevin Hart says in *The Decision*, "Bullshit doesn't come from other people, it comes from your head."

Suffer by never competing? Or suffer by chasing everything you ever wanted?

"It took me a long time to find my voice and I'm not going to be quiet," says Madeleine Albright. When she traveled for work, the former Secretary of State also regularly told foreign parties, "I have come a long way so I must be frank."

When you find your voice, it's your duty to let the words flow in a concise manner. Then, the various parts of creativity that naturally combine in any field come together to create something new, over and over again.

"When you're looking through the lens, you're responding to it," says cinematographer Trevor Forrest. "There's three things: the camera and the lens, a person in front of you, and there's the light and environment. If you can see three elements, you can change them."

Once you own your voice, you own the page.

Once you own the scene, you own the screen.

Once you find your voice, you can actually begin to mentor yourself in certain ways. Looking forward to a future version of yourself, you can create a present to reach unthinkable growth.

Once you have that inspirational voice within, you can then take more risks in life to see what works and what doesn't work.

In short, playing it safe never truly excels any career. Taking risk, on the other hand, can change your life. It changes the way you think. It changes the way you walk. It changes the fundamental aspects of who you are. Then you can experiment, collaborate, and find new ways to display your work.

"The best mentor you have is yourself, in terms of what can I do?" says Forrest. "What am I interested in, and how can I do it? Wake up every morning, ask that, and you'll be fine."

Through the risk of future self-mentorship, you can reach new grounds and surpass stale creative traits currently existing on life support. New risks will also change the way in which you find inspiration. When you follow that which excites you, it's impossible not to succeed.

"Don't become the prisoner of a preconceived plan," advises Williams Zinsser. "Writing is no respecter of blueprints."

When you take risks, you see all of the ways in which you were previously limiting yourself and your work. "Few people realize how badly they write," adds Zinsser. "Nobody has shown them how much excess or murkiness has crept into their style and how it obstructs what they are trying to say."

This isn't a discovery you can make doing the same thing over and over again. Every story you write, book you create, or character you build - is just an experiment.

In experimentation, there's success and failure, but your job is merely to conduct the experiment, then take note of the results. And when it comes to data, it's not personal. It's just business (this is why I refer to my weekly newsletter as "Writer Field Notes," as daily work as a writer is nothing more than an experimentation within the craft.)

Experiments aren't personal.

"One of *The Four Agreements* [by Don Miguel Ruiz] is: 'Don't take anything personally,'" Liz Feldman told me. "It's hard to do that because rejection feels personal, but it never is. It's always about the situation or the broader politics, and it has nothing to do with your ability and your talent. You have to accept that rejection is going to be a part of your career - a huge part - the majority of it," clarified the blunt screenwriter.

Likewise, author Elizabeth Gilbert would tell you, "Always remember that people's judgements about you are none of your business."

The good news for newcomers, however, is that failure or even perceived failure doesn't actually happen until you're already a success (which is another reason we can call it experimentation instead of failure).

Screenwriter Aaron Sorkin says, "Right now, if I write something that is a failure, there are a lot of consequences. I just lost someone a lot of money and a lot of people are out of work. For myself, there would be

public humiliation, so there are a lot of consequences. Back in school, I wish I had taken more chances."

Sorkin has one of the most unique styles in the business, but he now ironically feels somewhat trapped within that style, which somewhat burdens his work.

This is because the way in which we view success is different for every person. Success is viewed as something very distinct, but it's not. Richard Branson, for example, is clearly a successful billionaire, but if his goal was to live a quiet life, he's actually a failure. It's about your perspective on life and what success means for you.

When you start to challenge yourself and stop taking everything so personally, you can suddenly look at your work with fresh eyes.

"I have a low boredom threshold," says novelist Dean Koontz. "I have been known to throw away a half-completed novel manuscript if it doesn't grip me."

When you're truly prolific, the individual words on the page hold less weight, but collectively have a better chance of passing the test of time. Putting the pressure of risk on yourself will inspire new work, but if you can simultaneously push away feelings of fear, you can create something truly remarkable.

"Make sure every component in your memoir is doing useful work," says William Zinsser. "Write about yourself, by all means, with confidence and with pleasure. But see that all the details - people, places, events, anecdotes, ideas, emotions - are moving your story steadily along."

In ghostwriting, there are often content editors and line editors. In this respect, it's vital for all writers to

be able to switch their state of mind from creative writer to content editor to line editor. If you can wear multiple hats, you can create remarkable works. Then, you can focus on the points that are truly most important to you.

As you start to unlock a new version of yourself through perceived risk, you will begin to understand new aspects about who you are, but also who you can be. But, again, it's all how you perceive risk, growth, and failure.

Strategic Coach founder and author Dan Sullivan describes growth as "the gap and the gain." Sullivan would describe the two paths of measurement as that which makes happiness or heartache.

If you measure your achievements by how much further you have to go, you measure the gap, which brings heartache.

If you measure your achievements by how far you've already come, you measure the gain, which brings happiness.

You might seem a success to everyone around you, but be miserable within.

You have to look at each new risk as an experiment in which you progress to a new form of gain. Everyday that you write is better than the day before. Everyday that you try something new is better than the day before.

Measure the gain. Push your boundaries. Discover a new version of yourself. Everything you've ever wanted is just on the other side of fear.

"Some like to understand what they believe in," says Polish writer Stanislaus Lec. "Others like to believe in what they understand."

What will the next version of you believe in?

Part 3 - Process

Chapter 11 - Take Action Now

“Doing half of something is, essentially, doing nothing.”
-Jeff Sutherland

“Starting the process is what makes you ready,” says author Tucker Max, founder of Scribe Media. Max, who believes literally anyone is capable of writing a book, encourages people to dive into the process and essentially learn the method along the way.

This shoot-then-aim method has worked to help thousands of people finish their memoirs, write their business books, and complete all sorts of other non-fiction projects, but the same is true for writers of fiction, screenwriters, poets, and everyone in between.

One way Max and his team help people finish books is by creating benchmarks, or “champagne moments” to celebrate the writing process.

Rather than celebrating somewhat uncontrollable situations, like actually selling a book to a publisher or selling a screenplay to a studio, the Scribe team advises their students to focus on uncorked moments like celebrating first chapters, first drafts, or various other forms of practice-focused methods, rather than results-focused methods.

Finish a daily writing session? Pop the bottle.

Finish a chapter this week? Open the bubbly.

Finish the entire project? Saber the champagne.

“I like to keep my champagne moments closely tied to things I can control,” says Max. The results you seek in terms of money or notoriety, of course, will come later.

So many people try to write their first creation without a proper plan, or process, which guides them to the finish line. This is because there's a romantic idea of writers sitting alone at their desks, churning out fresh stories by simply following the character, letting the tale unravel on its own, or allowing for some kind of muse to guide them through to the end (these work for some, but they're exceptions, not rules).

In reality, the process is what makes a prolific writer, not the hope that some outside force will arrive and hold your hand. Starting the work, creating a process, and finishing the work is what makes you a writer. Anything else that feels like an exterior force connecting the pieces together is nothing more than an added bonus.

"I spent years not finishing work," says Michael Lannan. "A friend said, 'If you can finish something, you are miles ahead of most people.' Most people don't finish, because they always pick up something else to distract themselves or just leave it three-quarters of the way through."

You've met people who constantly talk about ideas but never take action. Unfortunately, those ideas are wasted. Ideas without execution are mere thoughts. For many people, talking about an idea helps them validate the idea, but if they never pen the thoughts, the idea dies. They die in the mind or within half-written manuscripts.

It doesn't matter what you can do, it only matters what you actually do.

Ken Burns would tell you, “The conversation is meaningless unless you start. Find something that speaks to you.”

Russell Brunson would tell you, “One hour of doing something is more valuable than ten hours of thinking about something.”

Casey Neistat would tell you, “Ideas are highly, highly overrated. Execution is all that matters. You either act on ideas or you set them free. You don’t dwell on ideas.”

Thinking and taking action are both valuable, but without the latter, the former doesn’t matter. It’s one thing to visualize success and another to go after it. The difference is the decision to seek diligence because it’s only within diligence that a creative mind becomes a professional writer.

Michael Jordan may have visualized championships, but he also had to get the ball up the court. He didn’t win those championships sitting in bed thinking about hitting the game-winning shot. Sure, he did that too, but just because you do the mental work doesn’t mean you can avoid the physical work. The same is true for your pen and pad.

Outside of unfinished manuscripts and half-written screenplays, you’ve probably seen this dynamic in a number of different ways.

The government project that’s $100 million over budget and two years behind...

The Silicon Valley start-up that ran out of runway after millions in angel investment funding...

The restaurant that spent years planning a menu but no time taste-testing in the community...

The list goes on and on.

This list of incomplete half-hearted attempts is so commonplace that Jeff Sutherland came up with a unique idea to disregard the planning phase, force people into action, and help people complete “twice the work in half the time.”

In a nutshell, Sutherland describes his Scrum technique as a method to create accountability among teams by opening daily methods of communication between groups and evaluating the process in an ongoing manner to create better efficiency.

Here’s a brief example for individuals in the real world: Let’s say you’re rehabbing a house and have a huge list of work to do. This is where Scrum comes into play. You can use something called the Fibonacci method to rank each item on the list. This numerical system uses a ratio such as 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 13 because the numbers are more clearly defined than simply 1 through 10 (meaning everyone understands the difference between 2 and 5, where 2 and 3 are negligible).

So you use the numbers to represent time and level of difficulty for each individual task. For example, your list might include painting the living room (3), mounting the television on the wall (2), installing a new hardwood floor (13), and hanging crown molding (5).

Rather than trying to guess the full length of the project, you take a guess at the individual numbers (and discuss them with your team if possible to see where you are missing steps), then you calculate the average numbers completed week-to-week. After a week or so,

you have an accurate average of how long the process will take based on actual results, rather than a guess.

Every other project or system in the world takes an educated guess and then spends months or years coming up with a game plan. Some government projects literally involve thousands of pages that no one will ever read, for a project that will never get done.

Scrum changes this foolish yet standard approach to painstakingly long projects and it can do the same for your writing process. It works for everything, but the main idea is to take action first, then calculate results.

The biggest priority behind the Scrum method is to work towards better efficiency, but also more accuracy**,** within restraints like time. It's a more accurately defined feedback loop because it uses data rather than guesswork.

In writing, rather than making the assumption you can finish the first draft in a month, just start writing. Then calculate how long it will take you based on initial results.

You write 500 words on day one, but how about days two through seven? Can you keep up this pace? What can you realistically do for two straight weeks? What about four? Now, all of sudden, you have a hypothetical idea of how you could physically write a book each year for a decade.

If this sounds complex or even crazy, that's fine. The point is, you can figure out your own method, build a realistic timeline, and take action today, not in a year from now. You can also reassess book one as compared to book two to see if your pace slows down. Either way,

putting in the work first is better than just talking about putting in the work.

When you guess how long a project will take, you create risk, but also a false hope. Instead, you're better off simply starting, then calculating how long a project will take based on actual results (there could be higher motivation in the beginning, so re-calculate often for an accurate number, especially if you're tackling a larger than normal project). In short, your process needs to accurately represent the best work method for you.

If you write better in the mornings, write in the mornings.

If you write better in the evenings, write in the evenings.

Put in the work. Check off the boxes on your list and continue. These signals of progress are what turns amateurs into professionals. "You need signals of progress," says author James Clear. "One of the challenges of building good habits is that there's a significant difference from the act of showing up and doing the work."

He adds, "The feedback loop - those signals of progress - they're way too delayed, too slow to maintain motivation. Making it visual - a spreadsheet, a habit tracker, an 'X' on the calendar - that goes a long way to creating a signal of progress while you're waiting for those delayed rewards to accumulate."

Work, then measure.

Write while you think.

Write in order to think.

Write, then edit.

Then, and only then, pop your champagne in celebration.

"Writing a book is a tremendous experience," says Seth Godin. "It pays off intellectually. It clarifies your thinking. It builds credibility. It is a living engine of marketing and idea spreading, working every day to deliver your message with authority. You should write one," he advises.

To reiterate the advice from Max and Godin, sometimes you need to take the leap before you know what's underneath you.

"When something has never been done before, it's actually easier because there's no reference. No one will compare you, so that gives me wings," notes director Louis Leterrier. "For me, it's less scary to approach something of this enormous magnitude when you don't have someone breathing over your shoulder. Then, every good take is a victory and the energy on set is incredible."

Leterrier is talking about the massive puppet series *Dark Crystal*, which included an Indiana Jones-style carriage race, underwater puppetry, and the biggest set Jim Henson's company ever created. He describes it as "a human story of foam and rubber" with a really high bar for their fans.

"I hope people keep taking giant leaps of faith," he says. "Netflix doesn't cut corners. They try to tell the best possible story for a certain audience and make one story the best way possible. That's the beauty of Netflix. Every day is premiere weekend."

If this sounds overwhelming, it's not meant to be. A leap of faith is supposed to involve bravery, but it's

also supposed to be simple in nature. It's all about small steps towards a larger goal.

And, if you're afraid of falling, imagine the fall as follows: there's nothing to hold on to and there's nothing underneath you. Being uncomfortable is suddenly about enjoying the fall, because for many people, it's the first time you really feel the freedom of the air.

"The single best rule I've heard as a writer is that the way to write a book is by producing two crappy pages a day," states author Ryan Holiday. "It's by carving out a small win each and every day - getting words on the page - that a book is created."

The small steps make up the journey.

The small steps define the process.

The small steps are the process.

"We substitute convenience and speed for process," cautions Ken Burns. "Everyone wants to have it done and I get it, but what you really want is to keep that scaffolding up long enough that you're sure the building is gorgeous and will stand by itself. It takes time and you have to do that. Have faith in the process."

As for everything else in between: it's merely a distraction. Put in the work and don't lose track of the major goal. Defend your time to focus on the process even if that means fighting yourself. Avoid the impulse to chase the next shiny object and finish what you started.

Chase Jarvis says, "Sudden inspirations aren't innocent. They are your brain's last ditch attempts to get you out of doing the work. A fresh idea will always be more appealing than the grind of a project that's already underway."

The next shiny thing is a distraction.

Hell, your good ideas are a distraction.

Focus on what's great until it's done.

The same is true for the little things that appear to matter but do not. In other words, the writing is important, but the marketing is urgent. You have to forget about the urgent until you complete the important. Again, the latter doesn't matter without the former.

Jarvis also says, "Never let the admin get ahead of the real work, the making and the doing. It's the work we do as a distraction while telling ourselves it's helpful because it's in line with the goals of the project. It's not the work."

We have to do the work to get better. "The best creators start with a plan. Nothing too rigid. Knowing how to balance structure and flexibility comes only with experience. You don't need a blueprint, just direction," adds Jarvis.

With direction, you can find the way.

With direction, you can become better.

You just have to face the fear that the work may not live up to the idea. "There's a legitimate fear that if we actually make something, we'll have to face the true state of our skills and accept how much improvement we still have ahead of us," concedes the photographer.

But, as stated in the beginning of this text, we have the time to get better. When we face this fear, there's room for growth. We have time to face our capabilities and even to exceed our estimated limitations.

For each individual item on your work list, James Clear would tell you to "win the moment in front of you right now."

This might mean writing your first sentence.

This might mean writing your next sentence.

This might mean writing your last sentence.

Through the work, you will find fulfillment.

Author Victor Frankl says, “Happiness cannot be attained by wanting to be happy - it must come as an unintended consequence of working for a goal greater than oneself.”

In other words, the joy comes from the process.

Everything else is somewhat irrelevant.

Simply trust the fact that if you put in the work you will get better.

Then, put in the work.

Sometimes it’s harder than you think. But sometimes it’s easier than you think.

“When you’re ready to stop, stop. If you have presented all the facts and made the point you want to make, look for the nearest exit,” writes William Zinsser. “The perfect ending should take your readers by surprise and yet seem exactly right. Knowing when to end an article is far more important than most writers realize.”

He adds, “Think small. Decide what corner of your subject you’re going to bite off, and be content to cover it well and stop. Every writing project must be reduced before you start to write.”

Herman Melville wrote about the pursuit of one whale, not the whaling industry.

Mark Twain wrote about a single boy’s journey, not 19th Century America.

Anne Frank wrote about her personal experiences, not the effect of the Holocaust on the world.

When you're content with the work, focused on the singular vision of the work, and willing to put in the work each day, it will be meaningful for both you and your reader.

Like life itself, the ending matters less than that which led you to the ending. As fitness expert Aubrey Marcus says, "Everything is a false summit. Success is the process." How will your process define the writer you will one day become?

Chapter 12 - The Cheapest Phase

“Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds - the writer is always slightly behind.”
-William Zinsser

If the goal of the first draft is to quickly take action, then the goal of the second draft is to re-write with bold intent. You can’t be afraid to kill your darlings. Remember that painful though it may be, at times it is the prudent thing to do.

“I’m not afraid to throw things away,” admits screenwriter Jessica Sharzer. “The writing phase is the cheapest phase. If you throw away a screenplay, aside from time, you haven’t cost the production anything.”

Sharzer continues, “It costs a pad of paper to change your mind. It’s the easiest and cheapest phase to make changes. In the editing room, you’re limited to the footage you have. You have to identify the problem and fix it in the most surgical way.”

Printing out a new 90-page script costs a few bucks, whereas making a movie might cost a few million dollars.

Printing a book manuscript costs a few bucks, while marketing efforts can cost thousands or tens of thousands of dollars.

This is all to say that the real money - income and expenses - comes after the work is finished, but in order to finish the work, you need to master the art of rewriting.

You need to master the process behind the cheapest phase. Understand that there is no limit to the

work you can put into the craft of writing, but also know when to establish (or seek) deadlines, when to give it another go, when to take a moment to rest, when to trash dozens of pages, and when the work is simply not good enough.

There's a process of ideas.

There's a process of writing.

There's a process of rewriting.

That's it. That's really all you need to know. The rest is just ornamental.

"If you can't rewrite, give it up," admonishes Mary Karr. "You need to be able to rethink and correct the easy interpretation." Karr is referring specifically to your first idea on the page. If the solution is easy, it might not be the best solution (I'm sure you've seen/read ideas you could top and the same fact will be true for your fans when they see/read your work).

Sometimes, you need to dig drastically deeper to figure out how to influence the most people. This doesn't mean you're trying to please everyone though. It means you're trying to connect to someone specifically on a deep, foundational level.

Seth Godin would tell you: "Explore what it means to make magic in the small, so you can do it again." It's the small things that connect with the big audiences.

In storytelling, you might need to list twenty solutions to every problem, rather than the first one that comes to mind. You've seen first-draft ideas in final form. They're dull and predictable. They're repetitive and not worth your time.

There's a reason that if you see Paul Thomas Anderson films, you don't also see Hallmark movies-of-the-week.

There's a reason that if you read Margaret Atwood, you don't also read dime store dribble.

There's a reason that if you listen to Jack White, you don't also listen to the Top 40.

Deep ideas stick with you. They're interconnected with that which moves you. They're emotional, but also logical. They represent a light in the darkness.

How do you find them? Consider this: What are the pain points that connect with people on a universal level? How does your work help people feel more alive or eliminate mental worry? What work speaks to you in such a way that you decided to pick up the pen and pad in the first place? Who do you wish to emulate and why? (If you can answer these questions, ask "Why" again - then "Why" again to your responses to get to the root of your true feelings).

True, the writing phase is the cheapest phase, but it's also the most valuable phase. It's the start of putting ideas down on paper, which can later be sculpted into something marvelous for those willing to participate in your craft. You just need to know through which lens you are looking as you move through the cheap-yet-priceless phases of the work.

"Correct spelling, correct punctuation, correct grammar. Hundreds of itsy-bitsy rules for itsy-bitsy people," writes Robert Pirsig. "No one could remember all that stuff and concentrate on what he was trying to write about."

Early in life, the focus is ignorant simplicity. Later in life, the focus is functional complexity.

Eventually, if you're lucky, you can reach profound simplicity. This is what it means to be a writer instead of merely a "hack." This is as true for writing as it is for life or any craft worth pursuing to the point of mastery. It's all about the evolution of the process.

Mark Twain says, "The most interesting information comes from children, for they tell all they know and then stop."

This is step one. Get the details down.

Step two is the journey to mastery.

Mastery is the final step of the writing process after you've put in your reps.

In other words, wherever you are now, if you write with the mind of a child, but then edit like a scholar, there's room for unlimited improvement.

"People aren't hard enough on their first draft," states actor-writer-director Robert Townsend. "They need to think through everything - all the details. Is the dialogue special? Is it original? Think about character description, wardrobe design, how the scene is set up, everything. It's great when a director takes it to the next level, but it starts with the word."

In short, he clarifies, "Quality will always win."

But, the good news is that the work is never truly complete. This might sound daunting, but it's actually quite the opposite. Because you have multiple drafts, you have multiple chances for massive improvement, but even your final draft could be rewritten as you grow as a person.

“I think appreciating just how long the process is frees you up from worrying about having to get everything exact and perfect on the first draft. It’s going to change - let it change,” says screenwriter Will Golding.

He adds, “Knowing where you are in the process can inform the writing in a way that isn’t cynical or limiting - it’s encouraging. In the beginning, you’re writing for yourself, then you’re attaching a director or star. Then, you’re writing for budget. That doesn’t make things worse, it makes things more specific.”

This is Golding’s process, but it’s telling of how to create your own process. Each level should help narrow your singular focus. Each level of the writing and rewriting should redefine the work in more minor details to allow the cream to rise to the top.

Johnny Carson famously chose about 12 of 300 jokes from the writing team each night for his show, which meant 96 percent of the jokes were garbage.

Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for most consecutive takes (127) in a single scene with Shelly Duvall.

Truman Capote said he believed in scissors more than a pencil.

“The idea that there is such a long process is freeing for the writing, because the draft is not the final draft,” adds Golding. “In fact, it’s nowhere near the final draft. In a way, you could say that road is long and daunting, or you can say that road is so long it’s freeing. There are a lot of opportunities to make it better.”

But, to face these opportunities, you have to get the first draft finished to get to the next draft and the only way to get better is to write often.

Everything you want to be happens in the field but, at the same time, if you want to be a great writer, then just be a great writer. The talent comes from the work, not the other way around. If you want to be a great writer, regularly churn out bad pages. Eventually, your subconscious will guide you in the right direction so you can churn out better pages.

If your abilities do not give you permission to create great work in the beginning, they certainly give you permission to create mediocre work. Take it.

You don't need a certificate.

You don't need a degree.

If you need permission, give yourself permission.

A career happens when you put in the work, not when someone else gives you permission.

"How to be a good interviewer, a good writer, a good cinematographer - all of those things happen in the field," says Ken Burns. "It's about jumping in the deep end. If we're too cautious, we miss the key ingredient. There's a human act of faith that takes place and has to bridge the gap between the objective truth and the kinds of facts that amount to a larger truth about how we approach our art."

For Burns, the truth is everywhere. He just has to consistently look for it. The same is true for each aspect of the story, including the ending. "Sometimes the climax is not the big crashing event you think it is," he says. "Sometimes it's a subtler thing. It's a pot boiling. All the

things you're doing is setting the water in the pot and when it boils, you've got a release."

Whether you're boiling over and preparing a release, or at a different phase all together, there are natural ebbs and flows to the work, because the writing process is a multifaceted process.

Sometimes, the white space is more important than the words, or as Conan O'Brien once said, "My favorite laughs are saying nothing."

The words, the white space, the letters, the frozen moments, it's all writing. "In the beginning, when there are zero pages, you have to cheer yourself into cranking stuff out, even if it later lands on the cutting room floor," writes Mary Karr. "Each page takes you somewhere you need to travel before you can land in the next spot" (Karr also says, "I am not much of a writer, but I am a stubborn bulldog of a reviser").

In the end, people like Burns and Karr are mainly focused on truth. This is because truth is everything within their selective fields.

"Forget how inventing stuff breaks a contract with the reader, it fences the memoirist off from the deeper truths that only surface in draft five or ten or twenty," writes Karr.

This is the same reason employers want employees with years and years of experience. Sure, you learn 80 percent of any career in the first six months, but that last, incremental 20 percent requires decades to fully master.

Unfortunately, no one can specifically help you master that last 20 percent. Instead, it's something you

must achieve on your own, through many rough drafts and many, many rewrites.

In the beginning, you need help.

In the end, you need to help yourself.

“Editors and counselors can do a good deal more for writers in the first-draft stage than at the end of the publishing process,” writes John McPhee. “Writers come in two principal categories - those who are overtly insecure and those who are covertly insecure - and they can all use help.”

He adds, “To lack confidence at the outset seems rational to me. It doesn’t matter that something you’ve done before worked out well. Your last piece is never going to write your next one for you.”

McPhee concludes, “If you have come to your planned ending and it doesn’t seem to be working, run your eye up the page and the page before that. You may see that your best ending is somewhere in there, that you were finished before you thought you were.”

Wherever your ending lies, the cheapest phase means reduction, reduction, reduction.

Greg McKeown would tell you to “delete by category.”

Russell Brunson would tell you to toss out the entire first draft.

Chuck Palahniuk would tell you to cut your short story in half.

To enter this state of mind, you need to examine each sentence on the page. Is every word doing progressive work? Can anything be expressed in a more economical manner? Are you hanging on to something purposeless because you feel it’s beautiful or wildly

personal? Or have you not yet done the deep work to make it all it can be?

"I love so many different things," writer-director Sam Boyd told me. "Whether that's Coen Brothers movies or Tony Scott or Sophia Coppola, or any number of diametrically opposed filmmakers, but I think I have happened into the romantic comedy thing, but it's about characters and people."

Underneath the surface, Boyd is inspired by humanistic filmmakers, such as Alexander Payne, Ricard Linklater, Cameron Crowe, and David O. Russell, where genre definitions can be somewhat limited. This led to his series *Love Life*, which stars Anna Kendrick.

"Over time, I think I'm going to still be interested in stories of character work and authenticity without it being necessarily a romance," Boyd shared**.** He is already doing a version of this with a few episodes in *Love Life,* discussing love between family and friends**.**

"I want to change the definition of relationships, in terms of what we're looking at in the show. All of that is to say, I've worked in romantic love, but I want to explore as many facets of the human experience as possible and not just romantic love."

Boyd sees much of his work as character-driven stories where the outline is less important, and it's more intuitive in nature. "The outline would be kind of boring anyway," he joked. "I wanted to find it as I went, which worked for the pilot."

Beyond the pilot however, the outline became necessary for the full anthology. "I learned so much from Bridget Bedard (*Mad Men, Transparent*) about how to

arc a season, break story, and make television, because that wasn't something I had ever done before."

"All of a sudden, I went from being a person who didn't write outlines to the kind of person who is working with a full writer's room and wanting it to be as open as collaborative as possible, but also writing outlines that need to get approved by networks, and the levels and layers of that."

The screenwriter described the changes to his process as various degrees that made it better. "You're really just working everything out so when you write the script, you've already sort of written it, in outline form. You do the work first, so it's just a matter of typing it out when you write the script.

"I think with *Love Life*, I wrote the pilot on spec and I was proud of it, but as proud as I was of it, the show only got richer and deeper and better from there as I started to collaborate."

For a long time, Boyd felt like he put everything he had into the pilot, but that was clearly just the beginning. "It got me there and got me this opportunity, but that was just the starting point in a way I didn't realize until we made all 10 episodes, looked at what was working, and wrote based on actors, and things you don't see until you're shooting."

He said, "In the same way I was talking about taking pressure off myself with shorts, where I made a ton of bad shorts that didn't cost any money, when I was ready to put money into it, I had less pressure. The same is true for writing. For a long time, before this script, I was always writing something. I wrote things

that never went anywhere, but something clicked with *Love Life."*

When you enter the depth of your work, you will inevitably change as a writer. You are essentially not apt to change by taking such a journey as writing a book. But it's equally impossible to change by not tackling a seemingly impossible challenge.

William Zinsser writes, "Writing is like a good watch - it should run smoothly and have no extra parts. Rewriting is the essence of writing well: it's where the game is won or lost. That idea is hard to accept. We all have an emotional equity in our first draft; we can't believe that it wasn't born perfect. But the odds are close to 100 percent that it wasn't."

He adds, "Eliminate every such fact that is a known attribute: don't tell us that the sea had waves and the sand was white. Notice the decisions that other writers make in their choice of words and be finicky about the ones you select from the vast supply. The race in writing is not to the swift, but to the original. You'll be tempted to use all the words that are in your notes because you performed the laborious chore of getting them all down," he adds about memoir. "But that's a self-indulgence - no excuse for putting the reader to the same effort. Your job is to distill the essence.

Zinsser would also tell you to "enjoy the tidying process" even though no one enjoys writing as much as they enjoy the feeling of having written. However, it's within these refinements, the actual work itself, where the work gets closer to something called "finished" if not something called "excellent." He says, "When I finally

get there I know it was the rewriting, not the writing, that won the game."

So when phrases come easily to you, be wary. they're likely from phrases you've heard thousands of times even if you can't put your finger on their origin. It takes a special effort to locate, eliminate, and refine these phrases. This is why they're so familiar in the first place.

In other cases, the solution is elimination. "Unfortunately, this solution is usually the last one that occurs to writers in a jam," says Zinsser. "You'll never make your mark as a writer unless you develop a respect for words and a curiosity about their shades of meaning that is almost obsessive. The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components."

In the end, writing is cheap and clutter is an expensive obstacle.

Clutter is something used by corporations to hide mistakes, not something artists use to express their vision.

The reduction of clutter is everything and fighting clutter is a never-ending process, like bailing water from a sinking ship. Each day, more and more water finds its way into the American language. It's our job to fight this clutter rather than to lean in to the derailment of the language economy.

Every society naturally moves towards unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous insights, and meaningless jargon. "Art is what you leave out," says Kevin Kelly. "To make something good, just do it. To make something great, just re-do it, re-do it, re-

do it. The secret to making fine things is in remaking them."

To make something great will mean working through various levels of discomfort. Everything you aim for as a creative should be just out of reach, yet also exist within your personal compass as a writer. It's the rules you create for yourself that produce the greatest, most creative results.

"What you want is always out of reach," writes Rich Cohen in his book on the Chicago Cubs. "Sometimes it's miles out of reach, sometimes you can almost touch it. If you do touch it, you will realize, after a week or two, that it's not really what you want, that what you want is still out of reach."

What you want should be out of reach. It means you're getting better. Reach for it, grab it, then reach for the next impossible thing.

The writer you wish to become is waiting for you. All you must do is plunge into the depths so often that when you arrive back on the surface, you no longer recognize your own reflection looking back at you from the conquered abyss.

Chapter 13 - Remove Presumptions

“Talent is distributed unfairly, but there is no limit on how much we can improve.”
-Kevin Kelly

Life is full of intricate questions, preconceived notions, and feckless presumptions. It’s human to seek for answers, believe in that which has helped you in the past, and make judgments, but, not all answers are equally valuable, nor do all answers serve you indefinitely.

Just because something is true at one point in your life doesn’t mean it will be true later in life.

As a writer, you can actually limit yourself with these shifting conclusions, in the same way that early coping mechanisms help you get through a traumatic experience, but later become an impending crutch.

Grammar is grammar, as for rules of the craft, but as you find your own writing process, it’s vital to be rigid in the beginning and flexible in the end.

“As you get older, your relationship to your own art and your own creative process does need to change,” says Craig Mazin, “or you’re going to suffer.”

You may suffer by limiting yourself to that which once made you successful.

You may suffer by limiting yourself to work that deep down you know is beneath your talent.

You may suffer by limiting yourself to a creative process that’s no longer challenging.

As creatives, there’s no limit to ways in which we can make ourselves suffer unnecessarily. Through new

challenges, new risks, and new ventures, you will find new levels of craftsmanship in your career. Some are painful. Some are pleasant. All are necessary in one way or another, even if it feels like you're missing the mark more often than you're on the target.

In the book, *Solve for Happiness,* Mo Gawdat writes, "Entertain the idea that what you've spent your entire life learning may not be entirely true. Knowledge is in no way a prerequisite to happiness. Your default state before you had any knowledge was happiness. As a matter of fact, false knowledge is the underlying reason for most unhappiness."

The happiness - or at least contentment - comes from removing these set presumptions, but also from giving away more and more of your art.

Give away physical art to those who need to see it. Give away written art to all those who need to read it. Give away everything that helps you suffer change, so you can create a tribe for your work, and a foundation for your process.

"The narcissist feels his gifts come from himself," writes Lewis Hyde in *The Gift*. "He works to display himself, not to suffer change."

Suffering change is what makes art worth doing.

Without the pain, there's no story or depth to the work. Without wind, a tree will grow tall, but inevitably fall over. For it's the wind that makes the tree grow sturdy roots. The pushback from every direction creates the foundation.

Without suffering change - or becoming temporarily uncomfortable - conclusions and

presumptions find their way into your process to limit your output.

"This is my style…" (even though it limits who I could become).

"This will equal success…" (even though it no longer inspires me).

"This is the way it's always been done..." (even though it's my own creative plateau).

If you come to a conclusion too early, you'll guide the work in the wrong direction. This doesn't mean you should avoid your outline, but rather to continually make sure you are working to tell the greatest story with the tools you have available.

Imagine your story as a six-week road trip across the country. There are certain tentpoles you want to visit, sure, but there are likely thousands of surprises along the way, for those willing to search for them. The same is true for your work.

If you draw conclusions, you're limiting yourself.

If you make presumptions about the way in which you work best, you'll guide yourself into a bottleneck that will work for a period of time, but not forever.

You need to be flexible in that which makes you rigid. Otherwise, you risk the chance of delivering work not worthy of your talent, or your time.

"It's all about arresting a momentum in a viewer and asking them for the extraordinary gift of their attention," explains Ken Burns, "and then rewarding that attention." You can only reward the attention of others by pushing yourself in new ways.

Ironically, this might mean failing more than succeeding, which will feel like a let-down to your “fans,” but your true fans will understand the need for growth. They’ll find joy in your journey, even among the “failures” between milestone projects (hint: the failures lead to milestones).

At the same time, you will learn more from your failures than from your mistakes. There’s a Japanese Proverb that states, “In victory, tighten your helmet.” In reality, you should always gear up for the next battle whether you win or lose.

Prepare for the inevitable but also for the inconceivable. There are a number of ways in which to do this, but many come from the ongoing grind of the craft, followed by self-analysis of the craftsman.

Author Tim Ferriss asks himself a series of questions when he tackles each experiment in life.

1. *Which one of these, if done, would render all the rest either easier or completely irrelevant?*
2. *If I could only work two hours per week, what would I do?*
3. *What would this look like if it were easy?*
4. *Could it be that everything is fine and complete as is?*

These are difficult questions to answer, but that’s why they’re so important to the process.

Without questions like these, it’s possible to lose focus on that which matters most. Edward Snowden would remind you: “Even the smartest amongst us relies on assumptions we’ve never put to the test.”

The same is true for suggestions from fans. At first, it's a good idea to focus on what your audience wants, but then you need to remember why you started writing in the first place. There's a message you want to share. There's a story you want to tell.

"Readers are not shy with suggestions, and suggestions are often good but also closer to the passions of the reader than to this writer's," argues John McPhee. Without this type of ongoing, scheduled contemplation, it's highly probable that you will be defined more by your labels than by who you are beneath the labels.

"Labels can serve goals," writes Benjamin Hardy, "but goals should never serve labels. When a goal serves a label, you've made the label your ultimate reality, and you've created a lift to prove or support that label. Who you want to be in the future is more important than who you are now. Your intended future self should direct your current identity and personality far more than your former self does. Over time, and through repeated behavior, your identity becomes your personality."

As your identity becomes your personality, you can find joy with the process.

When you truly understand what you want from your life's task or life's calling, you will find the peace you seek.

"If it is peace you want, seek to change yourself, not other people," writes Anthony De Mello. "It is easier to protect your feet with slippers than to carpet the whole of the earth."

In addition to finding joy in new ways, you can also find growth in new ways. As Nora Ephron once said, “If you can’t be happy while washing dishes, you can’t be happy.” In other words, the process is everything. The process leads to growth. The mundane leads to the extraordinary.

Conan O’Brien described his ongoing journey to make comedy as follows: “I’m looking for something that’s going to make me feel like Christmas again. You need to work harder at it as you get older and calcify. You have to work harder to find things that excite you, that scare you, and I enjoy it.”

Early in the comedian’s career, he focused too much on preparation, or perhaps even being the smartest guy in the room. While in an improv class his teacher instructed him to stop being the guy with the plan. In that setting, his strength was actually his weakness. “You need to have a plan but when you get in the moment, you need to be able to throw it all away,” he said.

In writing, it’s important to remember that the act itself is somewhat an act of ego. If you don’t realize this, you’re subject to making the mistake of writing for ego, rather than in parallel to what ego appears to be.

Once all of these things are in focus, it’s possible to not only enjoy the work, but also the work behind the work. “Promoting a book is part of your profession, so there’s no point in hating the process,” voices Chuck Palahniuk.

The same is true for meeting the thousandth fan. “When you meet a reader,” says David Sedaris, “it’s your turn to listen.”

Knowing how you work within each part of the process makes each part of the process better: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Clear writing is clear thinking. One does not exist without the other.

At this level, mastery is possible.

At this level, mastery is inevitable.

Ezra Klein refers to his version of mastery as a "journalistic iceberg," meaning that journalists who write headlines aren't just writing the headline (the tip of the iceberg), but using their massive knowledge about the subject as to how the current news relates to everything else that has ever happened in that given arena (the submerged iceberg).

"The product is the reporter's body of knowledge, not primarily the new piece of information," he clarifies. "What's beneath the surface - the knowledge and the past work - is what makes an artist."

It's the artist who no longer has to defend free time, but understands the importance of every moment, whether that moment feels like success, failure, or simply rest. When you find balance between these areas in the process, success is inevitable.

"Most humans manage to squander their free time, as free time makes them dysfunctional, lazy, and unmotivated - the busier they get, the more active they are at other tasks," writes Nassim Nicholas Taleb in the book *Antifragile.*

The goal should be hyper-focused work, but also hyper-focused rest. It's only when you can create on a regular yet flexible schedule that mastery is possible. In other words, know what your perfect day of writing looks

like, but also know what an imperfect day looks like, as both will lead to your successful career as a creative.

In an effort to avoid his own limiting beliefs, author Ryan Holiday asks himself a few questions as an analysis of the process:

1. *Where am I standing in my own way?*
2. *What blessings can I count right now?*
3. *What is the harder choice I'm avoiding?*
4. *Do I rule my fears or do they rule me?*
5. *How will today's difficulties show my character?*

Once you understand your current answers to these questions, imagine how your future self will respond to the same questions.

Will you continue to face the same roadblocks, attempt the same goals, and work towards the same victories a decade from now, or will you work with a clear focus towards successes beyond your current imagination?

Chapter 14 - Play Infinite Games

“We tell stories to keep the wolf from the door - the wolf being the sheer panic of our inevitable immortality. Stories bestow immortality.”
-Ken Burns

In an infinite game, such as professional writing, there are no winners or losers, only those ahead and those behind. As such, whether you feel like the conquered or the conqueror at the end of the day, there is no defined endpoint to a never-ending battle.

When you’re playing a game with no end, you have to prepare your body and your mind. There are countless battles to fight. There are countless wars to wage. You must be both physically and mentally strong as you prepare for the next day’s skirmish.

Fitness, spirituality, relationships, and writing seem like separate aspects of life, but they’re actually one and the same. Success in one means success in another, but the opposite reality is also true. To be a good writer, you need all elements of your life in order, at least some of the time. Granted, this doesn’t (and can’t) happen overnight, but it must happen.

Mental, physical, and spiritual elements must be continually addressed, much like the practice of penning stories. Mental improves the physical. Physical improves the mental.

“Theodore, you have the mind but have not the body and without the help of the body, the mind can not go as far as it should,” Theodore Roosevelt’s mother cautioned him. “You must make your body.”

Roosevelt, who suffered from asthma as a boy, was continually sick, which meant his genius was constrained by his many physical limitations. He started to train his body, in an effort to better train his mind. Even at a young age, he knew he was destined for a life of creativity.

Early in any career, it's tricky and cumbersome trying to balance the mental and the physical, but both are necessary for success. "It's like trying to dance with armor strapped on, bulky and awkward," writes Mary Karr. "By the third year, though, most seem to grow muscles to maneuver in that armor."

As you start to change over time, you'll find what works long-term. Eventually, you'll have to give up writing sprints and fad health plans.

In the short-term, for example, you'll find writers cranking out 10,000 words a day, but when you overdo it, burnout is inevitable (the same is true for overworking or under-nourishing your body).

In the long-term, for example, you need to focus on incremental change to see true, long-term results (you also must work to create lifelong habits to better fuel your body and mind).

The process will change perhaps, but having a process will not change. The process is what makes a writer a professional.

"Unlined leather gloves are best because they prevent sunburn, absorb sweat and keep your hands cool," writes Robert Pirsig about his character, the biker. "When you're going for an hour or two, little things aren't important, but when you're going all day long, day after day, they become plenty important."

The same idea is true for your process as a writer. Writing for a lifetime means creating a flexible process, but also sticking with what works, be it ritual or routine. This likely involves setting up both a morning and evening routine to ease into the process.

Again, one flows into the other, but overall, the rituals improve over time. Not only will you get better at saying “yes” to your important habits, but you’ll build up a tolerance for saying “no” to your bad habits.

Pirsig also believes his work creates peace of mind. “The thing to do when working on a motorcycle, as in any other task, is to cultivate the peace of mind which does not separate one’s self from one’s surroundings.”

“Peace of mind,” he adds, “produces right values, right values produce right thoughts. Right thoughts produce right actions and right actions produce work which will be a material reflection for others to see the serenity at the center of it all.”

The writer believes the way you do one thing is the way you do everything. “It’s the way you live that predisposes you to avoid the traps and see the right facts.”

He adds, “You want to know how to paint a perfect painting? It’s easy. Make yourself perfect and then just paint naturally. The making of a painting isn’t separate from the rest of your existence.”

With this in mind, living for a future goal - and nothing else - is also pointless. “It’s the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top,” explains Pirsig. “Here’s where things grow. To live only for some future goal is shallow.”

If you can only write under certain conditions, it's unlikely you'll be able to write for a lifetime. You still need to live your life between moments of writing. That said, your anchor habits will help ground you despite the conditions in your uncontrollable environment.

Author Soman Chainani breaks his day into segments, which he calls anchors. "I play tennis in the morning, usually at 7:00 a.m.," Chainani said in an interview. "I work out with a trainer at 2:00 p.m. Just having those two anchors makes everything smoother.

"I have a big block from 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. to write and then [another] after I train. That becomes the way I manage time." Chainani also said these two workouts fuel his writing process. "I always feel like I'm operating on pure adrenaline and operating very single-mindedly."

At the same time, he also has a clear endpoint to the day. "By 7:00 p.m., because I also think if you work too late, it ruins the work the next day."

This isn't just true for Chainani, it's true for everyone.

If you're going to follow a calling, a routine is essential.

And as an essential, it needs to involve your body and your mind.

"A calling isn't something new and shiny," writes Jeff Goins in *The Art of Work*. "Often, it's something old and predictable, a familiar face that's easily taken for granted, an old habit or hobby that comes back into our lives." He adds, "Before you know what your calling is, you must believe you are called to something."

When you control your body and your mind, you can actually build a brand new model that endures. As you upgrade your system, there's no reason to retire, per se, if you enjoy your work.

Haruki Murakami even relates the problem of gaining weight as a positive thing in his book, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, "When I think about it, having the kind of body that easily puts on weight was perhaps a blessing in disguise."

He clarifies, "If I don't want to gain weight I have to work out, watch what I eat, and cut down on indulgences. We should consider ourselves lucky that the red light is so clearly visible."

Similarly, a life of work is about staying fit and remaining active - mentally and physically - long enough to do the work that is your calling.

"We're really taking a completely new model, which is actually forcing your way to become a centenarian rather than just sort of gliding your way into it, and therefore I think it's going to require much more deliberate attention around what your mind and body are doing at that point and time," says Dr. Peter Attia, who is currently training people to be fit up to and beyond the age of 100 years.

While it might seem impossible to think that far ahead, it's more about how you spend individual days than how you spend a lifetime.

"To live one day well is the same as to live ten thousand days well," writes Aubrey Marcus in *Own the Day.* "To master twenty-four hours is to master your life. Nutrition, mindset, productivity, performance, fitness, sex, sleep - when we look through a keyhole at these

areas of focus, we forget that they are interconnected and interdependent."

Winning individual days is the same as winning individual sentences. Great days make a great life. Great lines make a great script. Great sentences make a great book.

"For some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that out of these small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet or excite you," writes Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird.*

"Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave, they show us what community and friendship mean, they show us how to live and die."

However other works influence you, the same is true for how your work can potentially influence others.

But you have to understand that you're always going to need new challenges. In other words, there's never a point in which you can underdeliver and feel satisfied with it. You must constantly battle your previous self to deliver exceptional work. No one else is going to do it for you.

"We're always looking for an opportunity to hand the keys over to someone else," writes Chase Jarvis. "That's a one-way ticket back to where you started."

When you commit yourself to the work, you can improve the work, measure your progress, and manage your future progress.

When the game gets difficult is when you can truly engage, learn, and develop new skills.

As Pearson's Law states, "When performance is measured, performance improves. When performance is measured and reported, the rate of improvement accelerates."

Once you understand that you can have a slight edge by doing the daily work, it's possible to battle the fatigue that comes with a lifetime of work.

You can fight off the noise that comes from the majority of creatives' willingness to saturate the market with junk, while finding your niche, time and time again.

"There's a lot of noise out there and sometimes I feel like I have a little triangle," jokes Conan O'Brien, "but if I can make that sound good and play it consistently over time, people are going to go, 'Do you hear that triangle?' I want to figure out what I do and play it clearly."

He adds, "Yes, it's easier to be seen, but many people are being seen, so being seen means less than it used to mean."

Conan, who has been in comedy for decades, from being a writer for *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons*, to hosting his own show, means changing your approach over time, but also being consistent with your commitment.

"There's no one answer. The simple secret is that I like to make stuff," he says. "I like to make people laugh. It gives me joy. Often the funniest part of my day will happen in the writer's room or in the hallway. I get juice from that."

On the road to mastery, there's simplification and there's confusion.

The more you know, the more you realize you don't know. Conan marvels, "I've been thinking about comedy since 1981 and I still don't know how it works."

Sometimes, you don't write well until you understand that writing is an evolving process rather than a finished product. You don't write well until you stop worrying about writing well.

The creative process requires time and work, a commitment to diligence.

With each new milestone, there should be a new challenge. A worthy goal for a year of writing should be that you end up shocked at how little you knew about the subject a year before beginning the job.

Once you complete a decade of this mindset, you will understand some of the insanity that comes from a true calling.

"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot," says Stephen King. "There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut."

Once you write a lot, you may receive praise a lot. Stephen King, as an example, requires someone to ice his arm during marathon autograph sessions. Once, in addition to the ice pack, he also noticed blood pouring from his hand.

"I'm bleeding on the stock," he said. But, fans were so thrilled they begged for their book to be bled on next. So, he dropped a little bit of his blood on all 15,000 copies.

Whatever you seek in life will come only from putting in the work. It is also important to seek peer

groups who are facing similar, or more difficult challenges.

"Climbing Everest is a serious achievement," says financial advisor Ramit Sethi. "You cross 100-foot-deep ice chasms on bridges made of flimsy ladders. The air grows so think you have to carry oxygen tanks to think straight. The entire trip takes two months."

He continues, "But, what most people don't realize is, no Westerner would ever make it to the summit without the help of local sherpas. They make the once-in-a-lifetime trek multiple times a year. The same secret that gives sherpas their edge can give you an edge in your life. Put 10 percent more effort into something you usually do on autopilot."

When you put yourself in a situation where you are amongst giants, it's possible to become a giant. Then, the difficulty and preciousness of writing is removed, so you can focus on the craft without being overwhelmed by the act of doing the craft.

Again, most writers prefer to have written than to perform the act of writing, but if you're in it for fame and notoriety alone, your chances of success are perhaps the equivalent of purchasing a winning lottery ticket.

"Somehow the simple addition of air-tight plastic bags (has) transformed the books from vehicles of liveliness into commodities, like bread made with chemicals to keep it from perishing," writes Lewis Hyde.

The autographs.

The bookstores.

The plastic wrap.

The important meetings.

The Hollywood premiere.

These things don’t matter.

What matters is your time at the desk. The time at the desk is the only way to face the infinite game. Will you cherish your body and mind long enough to deliver work worthy of such a calling?

Chapter 15 - Develop Full Arsenal

“Be so good they can’t ignore you.”
-Steve Martin

There’s an array of reasons why fans love James Bond movies, from the gadgets to his all-around charismatic coolness, to the iconic “Bond girls.”

As a character, he’s an agent with a license to kill, but Bond is much more, as he’s a strategist, a detective, a multi-linguist, a martial artist, a skilled assassin, a marksman, a driver, an aviator, a professional-level gambler, and a master of seduction.

The list goes on and on, but all in all, Bond is a jack of all trades and master of many, who has a full arsenal of enviable skills at his disposal.

As a creative, you also need a full arsenal at your disposal.

“I was fortunate to work with a group of young filmmakers who were growing together,” Jeff Cronenweth told me. “Our careers have been parallel. One thing this group does is bounce back and forth rather than dedicate [themselves] to one medium. The guys in that time frame had a full arsenal of mediums to shoot in.”

Working in an array of mediums, Cronenweth eventually teamed up with Director David Fincher. In terms of their combined style, he said, “I think it’s great to be known to have a particular style or look, but you’ll be cheating everyone and yourself if you don’t have an arsenal of techniques and disciplines.”

He added, “You should be able to shoot everything or you limit yourself. I think you can own a look, but you have to have a whole toolbox full of looks.”

As a shooting duo, Cronenweth and Fincher developed a very specific style, but the signature doesn’t limit their work, it enhances it. “Paint broader strokes and you have a much better chance of succeeding and you’re still able to find a signature look within that.”

The same is true for Ken Burns, who was inspired to become a filmmaker as a child when he saw his stoic father start to cry while watching a documentary. Like Fincher, Burns too has a very specific style (which even led to a function called the Ken Burns effect in Apple’s iMovie) but it only developed after trying an array of different looks over a lifetime.

“If you never stop researching and you never stop writing, then your process flows into one another,” says Burns in his online *Masterclass*. “It’s organic. You collect as much as you can and see what is talking to you. My pockets are filled with scraps of paper. We’re just collecting lots of ideas.”

Burns describes his process as follows: “Everyone knows what happened, but how you tell it is hugely important.” As for the way he views his own career, he says, “What do I do for a living? I wake the dead.”

It’s within a signature style, however, that the danger lies. This is why you need a full arsenal. Without a full arsenal, you force yourself onto a highway with no exits. “You point to something as having quality and the

quality tends to go away," writes Zen master Robert Pirsig.

It's within this tightrope walk that you have to balance the signature look, the arsenal of style, and everything that will eventually come after.

And, as complex as it might sound, it's actually just a moveable form of creativity that turns the rigid into the flexible, or as Jim Carrey once said, "Sometimes you have to pick up the crown and wear it well."

Wearing the crown well means continuing the learning process.

Wearing the crown well means embracing new ideas and adding your spin to any given project.

Wearing the crown well means experiencing more failures than successes, but learning from the missteps to create truly iconic pieces for your true fans.

"The only real learning results from hang-ups, where instead of expanding the branches of what you already know, you have to stop and drift laterally for a while until you come across something that allows you to expand the roots of what you already know," writes Pirsig.

The lateral drift clearly means shifting to more difficult projects, but it could also mean shifting to seemingly less difficult projects.

As you shift, don't ignore certain elements even if they seem beneath you.

Follow your creative impulses.

Chase your creative instincts.

Know that in a truly creative life, nothing is off limits.

“If nonfiction is where you do your best writing, or your best teaching of writing, don’t be buffaloed into the idea that it is an inferior species,” writes William Zinsser. “Good writing is good writing, whatever form it takes and whatever we call it.”

In short, there’s no subject you don’t have permission to tackle. Even the most mundane work has the potential to fully shape your arsenal. Conquer the minutiae to better develop your craft. Work through the repetition to filter the complex into the simplistic.

Seth Godin got his start helping others market their books.

Ernest Hemingway got his start writing crime articles in Kansas City.

F. Scott Fitsgerald got his start writing advertising copy and unsuccessful screenplays.

There’s no limit to how much success can come from the grind of the mundane. It’s in the repetition that the true art form lies. It’s the passageway to getting that which is most personal on the page - that with which others can connect.

Oftentimes, novice writers avoid subjects close to the chest because they either miss the significance or belittle the topic.

If something feels small to you, know that nothing is small if taken seriously.

“If the reader catches you in just one bogus statement that you are trying to pass off as true, everything you write thereafter will be suspect,” adds Zinsser. “It’s too great a risk, and not worth taking.”

Sometimes, the drift is a drift in the medium itself, but not the art form or even the subject matter.

“Repeating the story - good or bad - allows us to exhaust the unresolved emotion of it,” writes Chuck Palahniuk.

Martin Scorsese continues to embrace religion and violence in his films.

Noah Baumbach repeats ideas in scripts over and over again in early drafts to find a satisfying conclusion.

Bong Joon-ho told a dozen stories of class warfare until he won Best Picture for *Parasite.*

All of this is to say there is no single route to success. Instead, the route to success is that which works for you, which is likely the most personal, most unique style for you, but it also might come in the revolving door of styles and genres.

“Once a style or genre becomes too copied, reader fatigue kills it,” writes Palahniuk. “If I told you a surefire formula, it would fail from overuse.”

Since there is no formula, anything new begins with the fiction of what could be. Imagination is the most potent force in the universe.

It’s not your job to follow a formula, nor is it your job to please everyone every single time. Instead, you’re supposed to be the artist, not someone who spends an obsessive amount of time worrying about the art. Create rather than critique. Publish rather than obsess over reviews.

To become the artist obsessed over art and not the critique of art, focus intently on the art, release it, then move on to the next piece.

Be purposeful.

Be patient.

Be prolific.

"The difference between a great writer and a decent writer is that great writers are never satisfied," Liz Feldman told me. "They're continually working at it and etching away at the joke, at the dialogue, at the monologue, to see what's the best possible version."

Feldman accepted her perfectionism while writing jokes for Ellen DeGeneres. "[Ellen] would give notes, then say, 'You can beat that.' I would literally sprint back to my office to get behind my computer and quickly think how I could beat the joke."

She went on, "[That job] was certainly a real pressure cooker. It's really about pushing yourself to dig deeper into your own perspective on whatever subject matter you're writing about. [Ellen] pushed me to become a better joke writer and not to settle for something that's fine when you could mine the material for something great. Many of my building blocks, my ethos as a writer, a boss, a showrunner, comes from the work ethic of working with her."

You need to give yourself permission to work in the way you work best. And, if you're judging your work in the middle of any process, you're judging your work at the wrong time.

"Random words don't look like anything till somebody sings them," says T-Bone Burnett.

Judging yourself, therefore, is reducing yourself to one of two options. With that idea in mind, Brene Brown would say to you, "We learned that when faced with either-or dilemmas, the first question we should ask is, 'who benefits by forcing people to choose?'"

Ignoring the idea that you need to choose one route over the other, consider this as your final series of questions: What makes you a writer? What makes you want to write?

“You might think it’s procrastination, but with the right intention, it isn’t; it's motion,” writes Elizabeth Gilbert. “And, any motion whatsoever beats inertia, because inspiration will always be drawn to motion.”

The act of motion, day in and day out, is what makes you a writer. Everything that comes after is manufactured luck. But, if you do have to choose a method in which to write, Chuck Palahniuk would say, “Do not write to be liked. Write to be remembered.”

Writing to be remembered means writing often and writing with the intent to influence your readers. When you serve others, they’ll share your work, and encourage new readers to take a chance on your message.

So when you prepare your desk for battle, ignore the impulse for perfection. Instead, focus on the daily habit of getting words down on the page.

When you sit down to write tomorrow and all of the days hereafter, write for your future self and for your future readers.

Defend your time.

Find your voice.

Master your process.

And, when you buy your ink, buy the barrel.